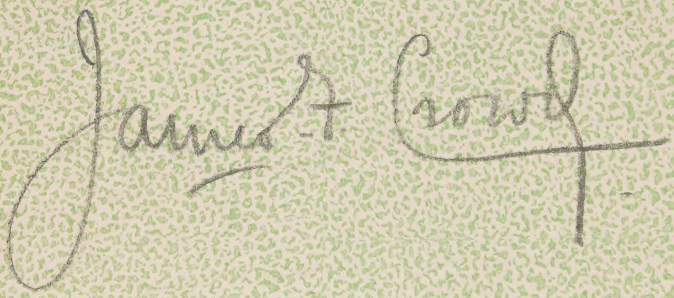
THE GOOD COMPANIONS

J. B. PRIESTLEY



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THE · GOOD · COMPANIONS

WORKS BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

Fiction

ADAM IN MOONSHINE
THE OLD DARK HOUSE
FARTHING HALL (with Hugh Walpole)

Essays, Etc.

BRIEF DIVERSIONS
PAPERS FROM LILLIPUT
I FOR ONE
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TOO MANY PEOPLE

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MEREDITH (ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS)
PEACOCK (ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS)
THE ENGLISH NOVEL

The Good Companions

BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

VOLUME I

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H-D

To

HUGH WALPOLE

for a friendship that has even
triumphantly survived a collaboration

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· BOOK ONE ·

Chapter One

MR. OAKROYD LEAVES HOME

I

THERE, far below, is the knobbly backbone of England, the Pennine Range. At first, the whole dark length of it, from the Peak to Cross Fell, is visible. Then the Derbyshire hills and the Cumberland fells disappear, for you are descending, somewhere about the middle of the range, where the high moorland thrusts itself between the woollen mills of Yorkshire and the cotton mills of Lancashire. Great winds blow over miles and miles of ling and bog and black rock, and the curlews still go crying in that empty air as they did before the Romans came. There is a glitter of water here and there, from the moorland tarns that are now called reservoirs. In summer you could wander here all day, listening to the larks, and never meet a soul. In winter you could lose your way in an hour or two and die of exposure perhaps, not a dozen miles from where the Bradford trams end or the Burnley trams begin. Here are Bodkin Top and High Greave and Black Moor and Four Gates End, and though these are lonely places, almost unchanged since the Doomsday Book was compiled, you cannot understand industrial Yorkshire and Lancashire, the wool trade and the cotton trade and many other things besides, such as the popularity of Handel's *Messiah* or the Northern Union Rugby game, without having seen such places. They hide many secrets. Where the moor thins out are patches of ground called "Intake," which means that they are land wrested from the grasp of the moor. Over to the right is a long smudge of smoke, beneath which the towns of the West Riding lie buried, and fleeces, tops, noils, yarns, stuffs, come and go, in and out of the mills, down to the railways and canals and lorries. All this too, you may say, is a kind of Intake.

At first the towns only seem a blacker edge to the high moorland,

so many fantastic outcroppings of its rock, but now that you are closer, you see the host of tall chimneys, the rows and rows of little houses, built of blackening stone, that are like tiny sharp ridges on the hills. These windy moors, these clanging dark valleys, these factories and little stone houses, this business of Intaking, have between them bred a race that has special characteristics. Down there are thousands and thousands of men and women who are stocky and hold themselves very stiffly, who have short upper lips and long chins, who use emphatic consonants and very broad vowels and always sound aggressive, who are afraid of nothing but mysterious codes of etiquette and any display of feeling. If it were night, you would notice strange constellations low down in the sky and little golden beetles climbing up to them. These would be street lamps and lighted tramcars on the hills, for here such things are little outposts in No Man's Land and altogether more adventurous and romantic than ordinary street lamps and tramcars. It is not night, however, but a late September afternoon. Some of its sunshine lights up the nearest of the towns, most of it jammed into a narrow valley running up to the moors. It must be Bruddersford, for there, where so many roads meet, is the Town Hall, and if you know the district at all you must immediately recognize the Bruddersford Town Hall, which has a clock that plays *Tom Bowling* and *The Lass of Richmond Hill*. It has been called "a noble building in the Italian Renaissance style" and always looks as if it had no right to be there.

Yes, it is Bruddersford. Over there is the enormous factory of Messrs. Holdsworth and Co., Ltd., which has never been called a noble building in any style but nevertheless looks as if it had a perfect right to be there. The roof of the Midland Railway Station glitters in the sun, and not very far away is another glitter from the glass roof of the Bruddersford Market Hall, where, securely under cover, you may have a ham tea or buy boots and pans and mint humbugs and dress lengths and comic songs. That squat bulk to the left of the Town Hall is the Lane End Congregational Chapel, a monster that can swallow any two thousand people who happen to be in search of "hearty singing and a bright service." That streak of slime must be the Leeds and Liverpool Canal or the Aire and Calder Canal, one of the two. There is a little forest of mill chimneys. Most of them are only puffing meditatively, for it

is Saturday afternoon and nearly four hours since the workpeople swarmed out through the big gates. Some of the chimneys show no signs of smoke; they have been quiet for a long time, have stayed there like monuments of an age that has vanished, and all because trade is still bad. Perhaps some of these chimneys have stopped smoking because fashionable women in Paris and London and New York have cried to one another, "My dear, you can't possibly wear that!" and less fashionable women have repeated it after them, and quite unfashionable women have finally followed their example, and it has all ended in machines lying idle in Bruddersford. Certainly, trade is still very bad. But as you look down on Bruddersford, you feel that it will do something about it, that it is only biding its time, that it will hump its way through somehow: the place wears a grim and resolute look. Yet this afternoon it is not thinking about the wool trade.

Something very queer is happening in that narrow thoroughfare to the west of the town. It is called Manchester Road because it actually leads you to that city, though in order to get there you will have to climb to the windy roof of England and spend an hour or two with the curlews. What is so queer about it now is that the road itself cannot be seen at all. A grey-green tide flows sluggishly down its length. It is a tide of cloth caps.

These caps have just left the ground of the Bruddersford United Association Football Club. Thirty-five thousand men and boys have just seen what most of them call "t'United" play Bolton Wanderers. Many of them should never have been there at all. It would not be difficult to prove by statistics and those mournful little budgets (How a Man May Live—or rather, avoid death—on Thirty-five Shillings a Week) that seem to attract some minds, that these fellows could not afford the entrance fee. When some mills are only working half the week and others not at all, a shilling is a respectable sum of money. It would puzzle an economist to discover where all these shillings came from. But if he lived in Bruddersford, though he might still wonder where they came from, he would certainly understand why they were produced. To say that these men paid their shillings to watch twenty-two hirelings kick a ball is merely to say that a violin is wood and catgut, that *Hamlet* is so much paper and ink. For a shilling the Brudders-

ford United A. F. C. offered you Conflict and Art; it turned you into a critic, happy in your judgment of fine points, ready in a second to estimate the worth of a well-judged pass, a run down the touch line, a lightning shot, a clearance kick by back or goalkeeper; it turned you into a partisan, holding your breath when the ball came sailing into your own goalmouth, ecstatic when your forwards raced away towards the opposite goal, elated, downcast, bitter, triumphant by turns at the fortunes of your side, watching a ball shape Iliads and Odysseys for you; and what is more, it turned you into a member of a new community, all brothers together for an hour and a half, for not only had you escaped from the clanking machinery of this lesser life, from work, wages, rent, doles, sick pay, insurance cards, nagging wives, ailing children, bad bosses, idle workmen, but you had escaped with most of your mates and your neighbours, with half the town, and there you were, cheering together, thumping one another on the shoulders, swopping judgments like lords of the earth, having pushed your way through a turnstile into another and altogether more splendid kind of life, hurtling with Conflict and yet passionate and beautiful in its Art. Moreover, it offered you more than a shilling's worth of material for talk during the rest of the week. A man who had missed the last home match of "t'United" had to enter social life on tiptoe in Bruddersford.

Somewhere in the middle of this tide of cloth caps is one that is different from its neighbours. It is neither grey nor green but a rather dirty brown. Then, unlike most of the others, it is not too large for its wearer but, if anything, a shade too small, though it is true he has pushed it back from his forehead as if he were too hot—as indeed he is. This cap and the head it has almost ceased to decorate are both the property of a citizen of Bruddersford, an old and enthusiastic supporter of the United Football Club, whose name is Jesiah Oakroyd. He owes his curious Christian name to his father, a lanky weaving overlooker who divided his leisure, in alternating periods of sin and repentance, between *The Craven Arms* and the Lane End Primitive Methodist Chapel, where he chanced to hear the verse from First *Chronicles,* "Of the sons of Uzziel; Micah the first, and Jesiah the second," the very day before his second son was born. To all his intimates, however, Mr. Oakroyd is known as "Jess." He is a working man between forty-five and

fifty years of age, a trifle under medium height but stockily built, neither ugly nor handsome, with a blunt nose, a moustache that may have been once brisk and fair but is now ragged and mousey, and blue eyes that regard the world pleasantly enough but with just a trace of either wonder or resentment or of both. He lives almost in the shadow of two great factories, in one of those districts known locally as "back o' t'mill," to be precise, at 51, Ogden Street. He has lived there these last twenty years, and is known to the whole street as a quiet man and a decent neighbour. He is on his way there now, returning from the match to his Saturday tea, which takes a high rank in the hierarchy of meals, being perhaps second only to Sunday dinner. He has walked this way, home from the match, hundreds of times, but this Saturday in late September is no ordinary day for him—although he does not know it—for it is the very threshold of great events. Chance and Change are preparing an ambush. Only a little way before him there dangles invitingly the end of a thread. He must be followed and watched.

II

As he moved slowly down Manchester Road, the press of fellow spectators still thick about him, Mr. Oakroyd found himself brooding over the hollow vanities of this life. He felt unusually depressed. His physical condition may have had something to do with it, for he was hot, dusty and tired; there had been a full morning's hard work for him at the mill; he had hurried through his dinner; walked to the ground, and had been on his feet ever since. Manchester Road after a match had never seemed so narrow and airless; a chap could hardly breathe in such a crowd of folk. And what a match it had been! For once he was sorry he had come. No score at all. Not a single goal on either side. Even a goal against the United would have been something, would have wakened them up a bit. The first half had been nothing but exasperation, with the United all round the Wanderers' goal but never able to score; centres clean flung away, open goals missed, crazy football. The second half had not been even that, nothing but aimless kicking about on both sides, a kids' game. During the time that it took him to progress three hundred yards down the crowded road, Mr. Oakroyd gave himself up to these bitter reflections. A little farther along, where

there was more room, he was able to give them tongue, for he jostled an acquaintance, who turned round and recognized him.

"Na Jess!" said the acquaintance, taking an imitation calabash pipe out of his mouth and then winking mysteriously.

"Na Jim!" returned Mr. Oakroyd. This "Na," which must once have been "Now," is the recognized salutation in Bruddersford, and the fact that it sounds more like a word of caution than a word of greeting is by no means surprising. You have to be careful in Bruddersford.

"Well," said Jim, falling into step, "what did you think on 'em?"

"Think on 'em!" Mr. Oakroyd made a number of noises with his tongue to show what he thought of them.

"Ah thowt t'United'd 'a' made rings rahnd 'em," Jim remarked.

"So they owt to 'a' done," said Mr. Oakroyd, with great bitterness. "And so they would 'a' done if they'd nobbut tried a bit. I've seen 'em better ner this when they've lost. They were better ner this when they lost to Newcastle t'other week, better bi far."

"Ay, a seet better," said the other. "Did you ivver see sich a match! Ah'd as soon go and see t'schooil lads at it. A shilling fair thrawn away, ah call it." And for a moment he brooded over his lost shilling. Then, suddenly changing his tone and becoming very aggressive, he went on: "Yon new centre-forrard they've getton—MacDermott, or whativver he calls hissen—he'll nivver be owt, nivver. He wer like a great lass on t'job. And what did they pay for him? Wer it two thahsand pahnd?"

"Ay." Mr. Oakroyd made this monosyllable very expressive.

"Two thahsand pahnd. That's abaht a hundred for ivvery goal he missed today. Watson were worth twenty on 'im—ah liked that lad, and if they'd let him alone, he'd 'a' done summat for 'em. And then they go and get this MacDermott and pay two thahsand pahnd for him to kick t'ball ower top!" Jim lit his yellow monster of a pipe and puffed away with an air of great satisfaction. He had obviously found a topic that would carry him comfortably through that evening, in the taproom of *The Hare and Hounds,* the next morning, in the East Bruddersford Working Men's Club, and possibly Sunday, Monday and Tuesday nights.

Mr. Oakroyd walked on in silence, quickening his pace now that the crowd was not so thick and there was room to move. At the corner

of Manchester Road and Shuttle Street, both men halted, for here their paths diverged.

"Ah'll tell tha what it is, Jess," said his companion, pointing the stem of his pipe and becoming broader in his Yorkshire as he grew more philosophical. "If t'United had less brass to lake wi', they'd lake better fooitball." His eyes searched the past for a moment, looking for the team that had less money and had played better football. "Tha can remember when t'club had nivver set eyes on two thahsand pahnds, when t'job lot wor not worth two thahsand pahnds, pavilion an' all, and what sort o' fooitball did they lake then? We knaw, don't we? They could gi' thee summat worth watching then. Nah, it's all nowt, like t'ale an' baccy they ask so mich for—money fair thrawn away, ah calls it. Well, we mun 'a' wer teas and get ower it. Behave thi-sen, Jess!" And he turned away, for that final word of caution was only one of Bruddersford's familiar good-byes.

"Ay," replied Mr. Oakroyd dispiritedly. "So long, Jim!"

He climbed to the upper deck of a tram that would carry him through the centre of the town to within a few hundred yards of Ogden Street. There he sat, his little briar pipe, unlit and indeed empty, stuck in the corner of his mouth, his cap still pushed back from his glistening forehead, staring out of a disenchantment. At times the tram jerked him forward, but only to return him, with a bang, against the hard back of the seat. People who were larger than usual, and all parcels and elbows, pushed past or trod on his toes. It is no joke taking a tram on Saturday in Bruddersford.

"I call this two-pennorth o' misery, missis," he said to a very large woman who wedged herself into the seat beside him. She turned a damp scarlet face, and he saw that it was Mrs. Buttershaw, whose husband kept the little shop in Woolgate. Everybody in that district knew Buttershaw's, for it was no ordinary shop. It catered to both body and soul, one half of it being given up to tripe and cow-heels and the other half to music, chiefly sixpenny songs and cheap gramophone records. Strangers frequently stopped in front of Buttershaw's to stare and laugh, but strangers are easily amused: all the people round about recognised that this was a sensible arrangement, for some wanted tripe, some wanted music, and not a few wanted both.

"Eh, well, if it isn't Mr. Oakroyd!" Mrs. Buttershaw knew him as both a patron (of the tripe counter) and an old neighbour. "I didn't see yer. And 'ow are yer?"

"Middlin', middlin'," said Mr. Oakroyd, with the air of one determined to give nothing away.

"I've been meaning to ask yer for a long time," she went on, "only I haven't seen yer—'ow's your Lily doin' in where's it?—Ameriky?"

"Canada," Mr. Oakroyd announced promptly and rather proudly.

"Canada—that's it. It's all the same, isn't it? Only some calls it one thing, and some calls it another. Well, 'ow's she getting on there? Eh, it doesn't seem more than a week or two since she was a bit of a lass coming in for a pantymine song—she liked a bit o' music, didn't she?—and now she's a married woman in Canada."

"She's doing all right," said Mr. Oakroyd, vainly trying to appear unconcerned. "I'd a letter t'other day." But he did not add that that letter, which began "My dear Father and Mother, I write these few lines to let you know we are alright as I hope you are," was reposing in his coat pocket, having been carried there—and brought out and re-read at frequent intervals—these last three days.

"She's settled in, 'as she?" said Mrs. Buttershaw, who apparently thought of Canada as a sort of house.

"Ay. She's settling nicely, is Lily. Been there nearly a year."

"Eh, fancy that! A year! Well, I never did!" Mrs. Buttershaw seemed to have these exclamations shaken out of her by the jerky movements of the tram. "Who was it she married? I owt to know, but I've fergotten. I shall ferget me own name soon, I'm that bad at remembering."

"Jack Clough, old Sammy's youngest lad," replied Mr. Oakroyd. "He were a fitter at Sharp's."

"Eh, of course!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "I knew 'im well. He were often in, buying a bit of a comic song and suchlike. He were a nice lad, an' a lively card. But then your Lily was a lively lass, full o' fun."

"Ay, lively enough. You knew when she was abaht." Mr. Oakroyd tried to speak off-handedly, but his voice warmed and his eyes were alight with affectionate reminiscence. He had always adored this only

daughter of his. She had been the funniest baby, the cleverest child, and the prettiest girl in that part of Bruddersford, or, for that matter, in any other part. There was something wonderful about everything she did and said. Even her naughtiness—and she had always had a will of her own—had seemed to him only a special sort of fun and prettiness, as good as a play.

"Yer must miss 'er. I know I do meself. Even Joe was asking me about 'er t'other day. 'E didn't know she'd got married and gone away, 'e knows nowt, doesn't Joe; 'e's always a year or two be'ind'and." But she said this in such a way as to hint that Mr. Buttershaw, with one eye on his tripe and the other on his music, was rather above this business of knowing things, an absent-minded genius. "Ther wasn't a nicer little lass came into t'shop, and yer can put that feather in yer cap."

Mr. Oakroyd was so shaken out of his reserve by this praise that he proclaimed very earnestly: "Ay. I miss her all right. I didn't know ah could miss anybody so much. Place fair seems empty like sometimes."

For a minute or two nothing more was said. No doubt both of them felt that this last speech had reached the limits to which confession might be pushed. Beyond were extravagance and indecency, and a good Bruddersfordian left such wild regions to actors and Londoners and such-like. Mr. Oakroyd looked out of the window.

The day was just crossing the little magical bridge between afternoon and evening. The early autumn sunlight was bent on working a miracle. A moment of transformation had arrived. It hushed and gilded the moors above, and then, just when Mr. Oakroyd's tram reached the centre of the town, passing on one side the Central Free Library and on the other the Universal Sixpenny Bazaar, it touched Bruddersford. All the spaces of the town were filled with smoky gold. Holmes and Hadley's emporium, the Midland Railway Station, the Wool Exchange, Barclay's Bank, the Imperial Music Hall, all shone like palaces. Smithson Square was like some quivering Western sea, and the Right Honourable Ebenezer Smithson himself, his marble scroll now a map of the Indies, was conjured into an Elizabethan admiral. The façades of Market Street towered strangely and spread a wealth of carven stone before the sun. Town Hall Square was a vast place of golden light; and its famous clock, as it moved to celebrate the enchanted moments,

gave a great whirr and then shook down into the streets its more rapturous chimes, *The Lass of Richmond Hill.*

To all this sudden magic, Mr. Oakroyd, sucking at his empty pipe and staring through the window, might have seemed entirely unresponsive. He was not, however. One hand went fumbling up his shabby coat. It would have gone further, would have plunged into the inner pocket, if its owner had not been sharing a seat with Mrs. Buttershaw, who was of a breadth beyond the dreams of the Tramways Department. But if the hand could not bring out a letter, it could feel that it was there, and having done so, it dropped, satisfied.

"And 'ow," said Mrs. Buttershaw, looking with disapproval at the warehouse of Messrs. Hoggleby, Sons and Co., Ltd., in whose shadow they were, "is that lad of yours gettin' on?"

Mr. Oakroyd's face immediately changed, putting on a grim and satirical expression. "I can't say. He tells me nowt. I think he'll be all right as long as there's still a good supply o' brilliantine an' fancy socks, and plenty o' young women wi' nowt to do but look for chaps." Leonard might be the darling of his mother's heart, as indeed he was, but it was clear that his father had no great opinion of him.

Neither, it appeared, had Mrs. Buttershaw. "I seen 'im o' Wednesday," she said severely, "standing outside a picture place—I think it were t'Plazzer—and yer'd have thought 'e owned it. 'That's Mr. Oakroyd's lad,' I ses to Joe, but Joe didn't know him. Joe knows nobody, and bin in a shop for thirty year! Nay, I nivver seen such a man. 'Yer won't know me next,' I tell him. But when I showed 'im your lad, Joe ses, 'Well, if that's Jess Oakroyd's lad, 'e's nowt like his father. 'E looks a bit of a swankpot.' 'Nay, Joe,' I ses, 'yer know nowt about t'lad.' But I knew what 'e meant. 'E doesn't like to see these lads all toffed up, doesn't Joe. Where's your Leonard workin' now? Is 'e still in t' haircutting?"

"Ay, he's still at Bobsfill's i' Woolgate," said Mr. Oakroyd, who did not seem to resent these remarks.

"Well," said Mrs. Buttershaw, gathering together her assortment of packages and her immense form, "'e'll nivver get fat on what old Bobsfill gives 'im. I nivver reckoned nowt o' barbers, and Bobsfill's one o' t' meanest. 'E'd go blind lookin' for a thripenny bit." And she heaved

herself out of the seat and, as the tram slowed up, went waddling down the aisle.

Mr. Oakroyd, beginning to expand again into what he felt to be his natural size, fell to thinking of his daughter and her letter. As soon as Lily had gone, 51, Ogden Street had suddenly shrunk and darkened, and there was no family life in it, no real home, only the three of them there, eating and sleeping and sometimes squabbling, with Leonard and his doting mother on one side and him on the other. "Don't you have it, Dad. Don't you put up with it. You look after yourself," Lily had whispered, just before she went, breaking up an old and happy alliance. Since then he had had a certain mournful pleasure in not putting up with it, in trying to look after himself. But it was a poor sort of business now.

He took the letter out of his pocket, but did not read it again. He had secretly hoped it would contain an invitation to him to go out there. He was ready to go at a word. A handy man like him could easily get work there. Six months' full time at the mill would easily raise the passage money. But no invitation had come, not a word about it. He hoped she had thought of it, had suggested it, and that it was only because Jack Clough, who was a decent young chap but, like the rest, bent on looking after Number One, had put his foot down that she had never said anything. He had mentioned it once or twice when he had written, just making a sort of little joke of it—"What would your old Father look like in Canada!"—and he did not feel like doing more than that. They had their own way to make, and a baby was coming. He looked down at the letter and then slowly tore it up and slipped the fragments under the seat.

The tram had ground its way to the Black Swan Inn (known locally as "t'Mucky Duck"), and this was his stop. He walked, rather slowly and heavily, the few hundred yards that brought him to Ogden Street.

Nobody could consider Ogden Street very attractive; it was very long and very drab, and contained two rows of singularly ugly black little houses; yet Ogden Street had its boasts, and its residents could claim to have both feet on the social ladder. You could, in fact, have a "come-down" from Ogden Street, and there were some people who even saw it as a symbol of a prosperity long vanished. To begin with, it was a

respectable street, not one of those in which you heard sudden screams in the night or the sound of police whistles. Then too, it was entirely composed of proper houses, all with doors opening on to the street; and in this respect it was unlike its neighbours at the back, Velvet Street and Merino Street, which had nothing but "passage" or "back-to-back" houses, the product of an ingenious architectural scheme that crammed four dwelling-places into the space of two and enabled some past citizens to drive a carriage-and-pair and take their wives and daughters to the Paris Exhibition in 1867. When you lived in Ogden Street, you did not disdain to talk to the occupants of "passage houses," but nevertheless, if you were a woman who knew how to enjoy yourself, you could afford to be sympathetic towards a humble passage-houser or put a presumptuous one in her place. Many of these things had been known to Mr. Oakroyd, an old resident, for many years, but he did not entertain himself now with any recollection of them.

The door, which led directly into the single living-room, stood ajar. There was no one in the room, but voices were coming from upstairs. Somebody shouted "Hello!" as he flung his cap down on the end of the shiny black sofa. He grunted a reply, went through to the scullery, where he hastily washed, returning, with eyes still smarting from the yellow soap, to look very dubiously at the table. What he saw made him shake his head. It was indeed the miserable ruin of a Saturday tea. Three dirty cups, pushed to one end of the table, announced that there had been earlier arrivals, and everything had the air of having been closely examined and then rejected. There were two pieces of bread-and-butter on one plate, half a buttered currant teacake and a squashed lemon-cheese tart on another; and on a third—for the tasty bit, the glory of the meal—were the mere remains, the washy flotsam and jetsam, of a tin of salmon. Mr. Oakroyd poked about with a fork in this pink mush, shook his head again, and made little clucking noises. Then he lifted the teapot from the fender, where it had been stewing its contents for some time, sat him down and summoned what was left of a rapidly vanishing appetite.

"You're back, are you!" This was Mrs. Oakroyd, who had come downstairs. She was a thin woman, with gleaming eyes, prominent cheek-bones, a pinched nose reddened at the tip, and a long prow of a

chin. She had two passions, one for her son, Leonard, and the other for virtuous discomfort. "I'm house-proud" she reported of herself; and if she could fill the living-room with steaming clothes a few minutes before her husband arrived home from work, she was happy. She had long regarded him neither as a friend nor as a partner but as a nuisance, somebody who was always coming in to upset the house, always demanding food and drink.

The nuisance gave her one quick glance, and saw at once that she was pleased about something, though ready at any moment to be quarrelsome about it. "Leonard's in this," he told himself, gave a nod, then gloomily poured some of the salmon on to his plate.

"We 'ad our teas," remarked Mrs. Oakroyd, coming forward into the room.

"Ay, so I see," returned her husband drily. "I wish I'd been here. Ther seems to ha' been a bit of a party like."

"Leonard's 'ere, come home this afternoon and brought Albert Tuggridge with 'im, so we all 'ad our teas together."

"Oh, Leonard's here, is he?" Mr. Oakroyd stared rather aggressively at his wife. "And what's Leonard doing here at this time o' day? I suppose nobody i' Woolgate district wants a shave now o' Saturday." As this was the only day on which many Woolgate residents ever did want a shave, this remark was the grimmest irony.

There was an added gleam in his wife's eyes. "Leonard's done wi' Woolgate. Left this morning. *And* not afore 'e told old Bobsfill a thing or two either. Trust 'im," she added proudly.

Mr. Oakroyd laid down his knife and fork. "Gotten t'sack, has he, or marched out? And what's he going to do now? I call that daft. Lad's got too big for his boots."

The gleam was really triumphant now. She raised her voice: "I'll tell yer what he's going to do. He's going to work at Gregson's. There's a chap finishing there today, and our Leonard takes his place o' Monday. Gets two pound and what he makes, and you know what Gregson's is. Now then, what 'ave you got to say to that?"

He had nothing to say to it. He did know what Gregson's was, though he had never been a patron of such a lordly establishment. Gregson's City Toilet Rooms were in the centre of the town, not two

hundred yards from Town Hall Square, and heads worth a mint of money were continually being trimmed there. It was impossible to say a word against Gregson's.

"Two pounds and tips galore!" cried Mrs. Oakroyd. "It'll be four pound ten, sometimes five pound, 'e tells me, in a good week, wi' regular customers coming in, wool men and travellers and suchlike. 'Well,' I tells him, 'if it is, it's better money than your poor father ever brought home, and you only fower-and-twenty.' Nay, I were that surprised! When I seen 'im walk in wi' Albert Tuggridge, middle o' t' afternoon, you could ha' knocked me down wi' a feather——"

"Ay," her husband put in, "an' when I see the way they'd both walked into that salmon, you could 'a' knocked me down wi' t'same feather."

"Go on, go on! That's right! Go on!" she cried, with the shrillest irony. "Next time t' lad gets a better job I'll turn 'im and 'is friend out without a bit o' tea. I'll tell him 'e can't 'ave any, tell him it's all for his father. You've got as much there as we 'ad. What you want's a caffy. What we sit down to isn't good enough for a man as can afford a shilling every week for a football match. He ought to 'ave 'am and eggs every night, he ought, steaks and chips every night, he ought, when he's so well off——"

"All right, all right, all right," growled Mr. Oakroyd, and tried to look like a man who had had enough of that nonsense. His wife gave a sniff, collected some dirty cups and plates, gave another sniff, then marched the things into the scullery, where she contrived to make an extraordinary clatter. Mr. Oakroyd let his features relapse into their ordinary appearance, loudly yet mournfully sucked at a hollow tooth, then took an immense bite of currant teacake and washed it down with a gulp of tea.

"I'll bet t'young women o' Bruddersford will find it hard to keep their heads screwed on tonight," he observed, when his wife returned. He nodded towards the stairs. "Is that Albert Tuggridge up there now wi' Leonard?"

"Yes. Leonard's getting ready to go out. They're off to a social an' dance at Shuttle Street Rooms."

Mr. Oakroyd smiled grimly. "I thought as much. There'll be some 'earts broken i' Shuttle Street tonight. It's fair cruel to let them two

loose on t'same night, and a Saturday an' all. It don't give lasses a chance. Them as doesn't prostrate therselves afore Leonard 'ull fall afore the all-conquering Albert. It's an absolute walk-over for the male sex."

His wife bristled. "A body'ud think you'd never been young, Jess Oakroyd, the way you go on about them lads."

"Nay, I've been young. None so old yet, I'm thinking. But I were never so dam' soft as yon two. Lady-killers, I calls 'em—Shuttle Street heart-breakers! Tut-t-t-t!"

It was not a bad description of Leonard and his friend, Albert. With them and their like was perishing, miserably and obscurely, an old tradition. Though they did not know it, they were in truth the last of a long line, the last of the Marconis, the Dandies, the Swells, the Mashers, the Knuts. Their old home, the West End, knows these figures no longer; their canes and yellow gloves, their pearl-buttoned fawn overcoats, their brilliantine and scent and bouquets, their music-hall promenades and their hansoms, their ladies, with elaborate golden coiffures, full busts, and naughty frills, all have gone, all went floating to limbo, long ago, on their last tide of champagne; and some foolish and almost forgotten song, in perky six-eight time, of "Boys and Girls Upon the Spree, In Peek-a-deely or Le-hester Squer-hare," is their requiem. But just as a tide of fashion, raging fiercely in Mayfair for a season, will go rolling on and on, depositing black vases or orange cushions in drawing-rooms more and more remote year after year, so too the tradition of dandyism and lady-killing, after it had forsaken its old home, lingered on in towns like Bruddersford and among such young men as Leonard and Albert. They lived for dress and girls, above all—not having the opportunities of a Brummell—for girls. They ogled and pursued and embraced girls at the Bruddersford dances and socials, in all the local parks and woods, picture theatres and music halls; they followed them on the Bridlington sands, along the Morecambe piers, into the Blackpool ballrooms, and even went as far as Douglas, I. O. M., to treat them to eighteen-penny glasses of champagne and other notorious aphrodisiacs; they knew, and frequently discussed among themselves, the precise difference between the factory girls of Bruddersford and the factory girls of Bradford or Huddersfield, between the tailoresses of

Leeds and the shop-girls of Manchester; they were masters of the art of "picking up" and, young as they were, already veteran strategists in the war against feminine chastity or prudence, and were untiring in the chase, tracking these bright creatures for weeks through the dark jungle of West Riding streets, but apt to be either bored or frightened by the kill. In the end, most of them—as they said—"got caught," and were to be seen walking out of their old lives, those epics of gallantry, pushing a perambulator.

The two young men now descended the stairs. Leonard walked in first, still patting his purple silk tie. He is a thin youth, with a very elaborate and greasy arrangement of curls and waves in his hair, a hardening eye and a loosening mouth, and an unfortunate habit of becoming spotty about the forehead. His friend, Albert, clerk to Swullans, the noisiest and shadiest auctioneer in the town, is larger and louder, and likes to brighten all social occasions by imitating the public manner of his master. Having no family in Bruddersford, he lives in lodgings a few streets away, where he says he is very uncomfortable. Already it has been suggested several times, both by Leonard and his mother, that Albert might lodge with them, but Mr. Oakroyd, who does not want a lodger and especially does not want to see any more of Albert, rages at the mere hint of such a proceeding.

"My words, Leonard," cried Mrs. Oakroyd, wiping her hands at the scullery door, "you're a swell tonight all right!" To see him standing there, in his new chocolate-coloured suit, with his purple socks and tie and handkerchief, was as good as an evening out to her, better than the pictures.

"Not so dusty, Mar," said Leonard, tapping a cigarette against the back of his hand.

"Well, well, well, well!" shouted Albert, winking at Mr. Oakroyd, who was pushing his chair back. "'Ere we are, 'ere we are! All merry and bright, the old firm! And 'ow many runs did the old United make today?" And he winked at everybody.

Mr. Oakroyd, who wanted to kick him, bent over his pipe and his packet of *Old Salt* tobacco, and grunted: "Drew. Nil, nil."

"Not much for a bob there then, what do you say, Len?" Albert

went to the hearth and straddled there. "The poor old United will 'ave to do better before they see my money."

"Rorther, rorther!" said Leonard, who was fond of entertaining company at times with an imitation of a musical-comedy duke. This was one of the times.

"Quaite, quaite!" roared Albert, who knew his cue.

Mr. Oakroyd, with the air of a man who had heard all this too many times already, very deliberately lit his pipe, then relieved his feelings by blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Well, they'll 'a' to try and get on without your money, Albert," he remarked, relishing his irony. "They'll 'a' to manage somehow, though it'll be a bad lookout for 'em, I can see that. Ha' you told 'em yet, or are you letting 'em find it out for therselves?"

At this moment Mrs. Oakroyd and Leonard disappeared into the scullery, where they could be heard whispering. Albert cocked an ear in that direction and then opened fire himself. "You've 'eard the news? Len's new job. Good biz, good biz! Got a rise meself last week. Good biz! We're making money, making money. What d'you say?"

It was plain that Mr. Oakroyd had very little to say and that it was not a subject that inspired him. He took out his pipe, looked at it and then looked at Albert, and asked very quietly if Mr. Swullans had sold any more mahogany wardrobes lately. This was a malicious question because Mr. Swullans had once got into trouble and a half-column report in the *Bruddersford Evening Express* because he sold a certain mahogany wardrobe.

But Albert was not abashed. "Now then, now then! We all know about that. Tricks in all trades! Did you know I was looking for fresh digs?"

"Ay, I heard summat about it."

"Well then, what d'you say to having this little drop o' sunshine in the old 'ome? What d'you think of that? Good company and a good payer, right on the nail every Friday night."

Mr. Oakroyd shook his head. "It won't wash, lad."

"Right on the nail every Friday," Albert repeated with gusto. "And all the family in favour."

"It won't wash. We don't want no lodgers 'ere. There's plenty as takes 'em without us. We don't want 'em."

"Oh, we don't, don't we!" This was from Mrs. Oakroyd, standing, belligerent, in the scullery doorway.

Her husband gave a steady look, then raised his voice. "No, we don't."

"Well, some of us thinks we do."

"Then you mun think again, and think different," said Mr. Oakroyd, with an air of finality. And before any of them could reply, he had taken his cap from the end of the sofa, clapped it on his head and walked out.

He told himself that he wanted a little stroll, another ounce of *Old Salt,* an early edition of the *Evening Express Sports.* But he knew he was afraid of what was coming. Having fired, manfully, his one big gun, he felt compelled to retreat. All the way down Ogden Street, he kept repeating to himself, "Better money than your poor father ever brought home"; and didn't like the look of things at all.

III

The week-end had begun badly for Mr. Oakroyd, and it did not improve. The depression of Saturday afternoon could not be shaken off. He could think of nothing to look forward to. He was troubled by a vague foreboding. It was just as if a demoniac black dog went trotting everywhere at his heels. Normally he was happy enough when he was smoking a pipe or two of *Old Salt* over the *Evening Express Sports,* learning how "Kelly pushed the ball out to the homesters' left wing and Macdonald shot hard from a fine centre, but the visiting custodian made a great clearance." But this Saturday night he could not settle down to the welcome pink sheets. It followed him, this black dog, when he tried another stroll later, into the centre of the town, and it even found its way with him into the singing-room of *The Boy and Barrel,* where he had a half-pint of bitter and listened to a purple-faced tenor, the victim of two passions, one for Doreen, His Darling and His Queen, and the other for Home, Just a Tumble-down Cottage. Nor had it departed when he called, on his return home, at Thwaites' Fish and Chip Shop (it called itself the West End Supper Bar, but nobody

took any notice of that), and ate three-pennorth o' chips and a tail while exchanging some remarks on t'United with Sam Thwaites, that excellent critic of the game.

Sunday morning was no better. To begin with, there was a bit of an argument about Albert Tuggridge at breakfast. Then the *Imperial News,* with which, like two million other Britons, he spent Sunday morning, for once gave him no pleasure. Listlessly he turned from *Secrets of European Courts* to *Dope Dens of Mayfair,* from *What the Husband Saw* to *Scandals of the Boxing Ring,* and the most startling revelations, the most terrible disclosures, failed to brighten his eye. At half-past eleven he went to the Woolgate Working Men's Club and sat there over a half-pint, only to learn, to his disgust, that young Maundery had been made secretary of the local branch of his Trade Union, the Textile, Waggon and Warehouse Workers. Mr. Oakroyd had not been on good terms with his Union for some time, and this appointment of Maundery, a hatchet-faced young fanatic who had an unqualified admiration of Russian methods, meant that very soon he would be on even worse terms. He disliked the chap, and only a fortnight ago, in this very club, they had had a long and loud argument, during which Mr. Oakroyd had horrified his opponent by calling "proletariat"—a term that Maundery used in every other sentence and regarded as sacred —"a bloody daft word." After that cheerless half-pint, he went home to a dinner that was a sulky silent affair and none too good. This was what he had expected. He knew he had now seen the last of his wife's best efforts in cookery for some time. In the afternoon, he dozed uneasily for an hour or so, suddenly decided to walk to the park, found he had gone far enough when only half-way there, and came back, dusty and gloomy, to a solitary tea. Leonard had gone off for the day, and Mrs. Oakroyd was taking tea with some fellow-worshipper at the Woolgate Congregational Chapel. Mr. Oakroyd ate and drank a good deal in an absent-minded fashion, then smoked two pipes of *Old Salt* while he gave himself to a mournful survey of this life.

It was nearly seven o'clock when he finally decided how to spend the evening. He would go and see his friend Sam Oglethorpe out at Wabley. Having arrived at this decision, he immediately felt more cheerful, for to go as far as Wabley, which is four miles out of Bruddersford and

almost on the edge of the moors, was something to do, indeed quite a little adventure, and he knew that Sam would be in and ready to welcome him. What he did not know was that this was a most momentous decision, that here was not a little adventure but the beginning of all manner of great adventures, that the thread now dangling in the empty space of his life was almost within reach, that Destiny was hard at work as he had his wash at the scullery sink, walked, took a tram, walked again, out to Wabley.

Yes, Sam was in, and glad to see him, and together they went down to the run and looked at hens. The two had worked side-by-side for years in the waggon department of Higden and Co., but two or three years ago they had parted company, for Sam had come into money, having been left four hundred pounds by an uncle who had kept an off-licence shop, and had boldly walked out of Higden's, never to return. He was now "on his own" at Wabley, the proud proprietor of a large hen-run, a little cottage, and a sign that said "Joinery and Jobbing Work Promptly Attended To." That was why Mr. Oakroyd regarded his friend with admiration and envy, for he too would like to walk out of Higden's for the last time, to have done with wages and foremen and the tyrannical buzzer. Deep in his heart was a sign about Joinery and Jobbing Work. The hoisting of that sign, proclaiming Jes. Oakroyd, the independent craftsman, to the world, was one of his constant dreams. And he was a better craftsman than Sam, too; give him a saw, a hammer, a few nails, and he could do anything. But Sam, assisted by the off-licence uncle, had managed to scramble out, while he was still in, in up to the neck, and lucky perhaps to be keeping on at Higden's at all.

Now, the last hen dismissed, they were cosily talking over pipes and a jug of beer. They were not in Mr. Oglethorpe's cottage, which was simply a place to eat and sleep in and not meant, as anybody in Wabley would tell you, for social life. No, they were sitting snugly in Mr. Oglethorpe's combined hen-house and workshop, with the jug of beer on a bench between them. If you want to know what independent men in Bruddersford and district think about life, you must listen to the talk that comes floating out of hen-houses at night. A man can afford to let himself go in a hen-house. Sam had been letting himself go, enlarging upon his plans and prospects, his hens, his Joinery, his Jobbing, to all

of which Mr. Oakroyd had been listening with deep and admiring attention. It was now time he had a look in, and Mr. Oglethorpe, like the good fellow he was, knew it and gave him his cue.

"Ay," said Mr. Oglethorpe, who had the slow meditative manner that properly belongs to Jobbing Work, "that's what 'appens i' this sort o' business i' Wabley, ay, and i' Bruddersford too. Did you give it any ittention, Jess, when you was down South? It'll be a bit diff'rent there, I'm thinking."

Mr. Oakroyd's face lit up at once. This "down South" was the cue. This was where he came in and more than held his own, for if, in this company, Mr. Oglethorpe was the independent man, the owner of hens and a sign, the craftsman at large, who could smoke his pipe when he liked, Mr. Oakroyd was the travelled man, who had knocked up and down a bit, who could talk of what were to Mr. Oglethorpe, who had never been anywhere, foreign parts. It was only in the company of his friend Sam that Mr. Oakroyd felt that he really had seen the world. He had not often been away from Bruddersford, though he had had a few little holidays at Morecambe, Blackpool, and Scarborough, had been on football trips to Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and had once gone on a wonderful midnight excursion to London and had actually seen St. Paul's and London Bridge before he fell asleep in an eating-house; but it happened that for a whole six months he had worked in Leicester, where his firm had a branch, and ever after he had referred to this exciting period as the time when he was "down South." It was another of his dreams, companion to that of the hoisted sign, this happy business of travelling, of knocking about, of seeing this place and that, of telling how you once went there and then moved on somewhere else, and although he knew he had seen nothing much yet and probably never would now, yet he was able, nourished as he was by his secret dream, to capture the manner of the true wanderer. During his six months in Leicester, he had lodged in a street that could hardly be distinguished from his own Ogden Street, had worked in another Higden's mill that was just like the one in Bruddersford except that it was smaller and cleaner. Yet when he said "down South," he seemed to conjure up a vast journey towards the tropics and at the end of it a life entirely alien, fantastic.

"Ay, it's different there, Sam," said Mr. Oakroyd, puzzling his brains to discover some proof of this difference. "It's altogether different there, it is."

"'Old on a bit afore you tell me," the other cried, reaching for the jug. "There's another sup i' this for both of us, I'm thinking. Nah then!" And he put a match to his pipe and looked across at his friend, his honest red face aglow.

"Well, then, you see," began Mr. Oakroyd, but thought better of it and drank some beer instead. Then he reflected a moment. "Well, what I'd say is this. Yer asking me how this sort o' trade, Joinery and Jobbing, 'ud go down South, aren't yer?"

"That's right, Jess." And Mr. Oglethorpe looked very profound as he said this.

"Well, what I'd say is this; that ther mayn't be so much of it down there but what ther is 'ud be a better class o' thing. D'you follow me, Sam?"

Sam did follow him and looked more profound than ever as he slowly puffed at his short clay pipe. Nothing was said for a minute or two. Then Mr. Oglethorpe proceeded to light a very old and evil-smelling paraffin lamp that hung from the roof, and when he had done this, he broke the silence. "It'll be all different, I'm thinking, Jess. I could nivver settle to it. But I'll bet tha liked it."

"I like a bit of a change, Sam."

"I'll bet tha'd like to be off down there ag'in next week," said Mr. Oglethorpe, with an air of great artfulness, as if he had caught his friend at last.

"I might an' I might not," replied Mr. Oakroyd, who was not for giving himself away at once, not even in Sam's hen-house. But then the hour and his mood worked together to fling down his reserve. He leaned forward and looked at once eager and wistful. "I'll tell you what it is, Sam. I'd give owt to see a bit more afore I'm too old."

"Yer've seen summat already, Jess," Mr. Oglethorpe spoke proudly, as if his friendship gave him a share in these vast migrations.

"Nowt much when you look at it."

"Why, look at me," cried Mr. Oglethorpe. "I've nivver been farther ner Wetherby, to t'races there. Nay, I'm lying; I have. I once went for

a day to Southport to see t'sea, but I nivver saw it, not a drop. It were a take-in, that."

"I'd like to knock up an' down a bit," Mr. Oakroyd went on, "an' see what there is to see afore I'm too old an' daft. I've gotten fair sick o' Bruddersford lately, Sam, I have that. I'd like to get on t'move."

"Where d'yer want to go, Jess? Down South ag'in? What is't yer want to see?"

"Nay, I don't know," said Mr. Oakroyd, gloomily. "I'd like to see summat fresh. I'd like to have a look at—oh, I don't know—Bristol."

"Ar," said Mr. Oglethorpe knowingly. "Bristol."

"Or I'd like to see—yer know—some of them places—Bedfordshire," he added, at a venture.

The other shook his head at this. "I nivver heard tell much o' that place," he said gravely. "Is ther owt special i' Bedfordshire, Jess?"

"Nay, I don't know," replied Mr. Oakroyd, a trifle impatiently. "But it's summat to see. I'd like to go and have a look so I'd know if ther was owt there or not. And I'll tell you another thing, Sam. I'd like to go to Canada."

"Yer nivver would, yer nivver would, Jess!" Mr. Oglethorpe slapped his thigh in appreciation of this audacity. "An' if yer got there, yer'd want to be back i' no time. Nowt to sup, they tell me, and snaw months and months on end. Plenty o' money, I dare say, but nowt to spend it on. Nay, Jess, I'll nivver believe yer'd go as far as that."

"I've a lass o' mine there, Sam."

"Ay, so you have. I'd fergetten. But I'll tell yer what it is. Y'owt to 'a' been a wool-buyer, Jess, and then yer could 'a' gone off all ower t'place and been paid for it. It'ud 'a' suited thee down to t'ground."

"I dare say," said Mr. Oakroyd grimly. "An' I owt to have a motor-car and twenty pound a week and nowt to do and plenty o' time to do it in——"

At this moment a voice cried "Hello!" and a face appeared in the doorway.

"Who's that? Oh, it's you, is it, Ted? Come in, lad, come in. Yer know my nephew Ted, Jess?" And when Ted had sat himself down on an old coop, Mr. Oglethorpe went on: "Now, here's a lad as can tell

you a thing or two about knocking up and down. He's nivver at home five minutes. Off wi' t'lorry all ower t' country, aren't yer, Ted?"

Ted, who was part owner of a lorry that called itself The Wabley Transport Co., admitted that he knocked about a bit and knew a thing or two.

"This lorrying owt to 'a' been your line o' business, Jess," Mr. Oglethorpe continued, winking at his nephew for no particular reason. "Where d'yer go next, lad?"

"Off tomorrow," replied Ted, a laconic youth who preferred to talk, like a ventriloquist, with a cigarette in his mouth. "Load at Bruddersford. Merryweather's, Tapp Street. Going to Nuneaton. Shan't get off till late tomorrow night."

"What time, Ted?" asked his uncle, rather in the manner of counsel in court, as if he already knew the answer himself.

"Ten or eleven. Perhaps twelve. Merryweather's got a rush on. That's how we got the job. Travel all night. Deliver in the morning. Hell of a game." And Ted, having finished his speech, took out his cigarette to whistle.

"There y'are, Jess. 'Ell of a game," Mr. Oglethorpe repeated triumphantly.

"It 'ud do me," muttered Mr. Oakroyd.

"It 'ud suit 'im," said Mr. Oglethorpe, turning to his nephew. "Yer'll 'a' ter give 'im a job on t'lorry, Ted."

"Nothing doing," replied Ted. "Wouldn't thank us if we did. He can have a trip when he likes, of course. See for himself then. Nothing in it. Been all over, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Leicester, Coventry, even taken it to London twice. Dozens o' smaller places. All over. Nothing in it. Get sick of it. Same old carry-on every time. Places all alike when you come to know 'em."

"Nay, I'll be damned if they are," Mr. Oakroyd protested. "You may 'a' seen a sight more ner I have, but you must 'a' given it a funny sort o' look to think that. Places is as different as chalk and cheese. I soon picked that out when I were down South."

"Ay, that's right," Mr. Oglethorpe observed. "I've heard Jess 'ere tell many a time 'ow diff'rent it is. I've seen nowt much, but yer can nivver tell me places is all alike. Why, ther's Wabley 'ere is as diff'rent

as owt from all t'other small places round Bruddersford. Amazin' it is, fair amazin'! Then Bruddersford's ner more like Leeds or Halifax than I'm like Billy Baxter."

"Who's Billy Baxter?" This was from Ted, who ought to have known better.

"What! Nivver heard o' Billy Baxter!" cried Mr. Oglethorpe, in great glee. "Well, well, well! Billy Baxter were the fellow that could nivver stand up without getting on his feet." And Mr. Oglethorpe began to punch himself, and shake and splutter and cough, until at last he was purple and helpless.

"Tha hasn't selled that to anybody for years, Sam," said Mr. Oakroyd approvingly. "Ted's learned summat tonight, anyway."

Ted, still with a cigarette in his mouth, was shaking his head and at the same time making a loud tut-tutting noise. He was not abashed—as a man of the world, he could afford to ignore such primitive jests—but he knew that his prestige was gone for the remainder of the evening, and so, after giving his uncle a resounding slap or two on the back, he took his leave.

Mr. Oakroyd stayed long enough to smoke another pipe, and was then steered through the darkness—for it was late now—by his host, who accompanied him as far as the tram terminus. The tram that was waiting there, however, only took him to the outskirts of Bruddersford, where it went groaning into its shed. Mr. Oakroyd would have to walk the rest of the way. As a rule he liked to go to bed early on Sunday night, but now he was in no mood to consider Monday morning, more especially as he had just left the company of an independent craftsman and a man of travel. The night was fine and he was not tired. Off he went, with his old brown cap at the back of his head, whistling softly and watching his shadow that grew and then dwindled between one street-lamp and the next. He was walking back into something that was beginning to look like slavery, but the large quiet night was his, and a man might fancy himself anything, proprietor of a Joinery and Jobbing sign, owner of a lorry commanded to go to Bristol or Bedfordshire, even a chap going out to Canada to see his daughter, as he walked in peace through such a night.

He was now in the Merton Park district, Bruddersford's best suburb,

where the wool merchants and the manufacturers and the bank managers had their detached villas. These pleasant avenues were full of leafy shadows, for there were trees in the gardens and trees alternating with the street-lamps on the pavement itself. Now and then he heard the distant sound of a piano. Two or three cars rolled past. Sometimes from the deeper shadows there came a whispering and sound of kissing, for lovers in Bruddersford favoured the Merton Park district. There were very few of them about now, however; it was too late. Learoyd Avenue, longest and leafiest of these opulent roads, was very quiet. Yet it was in Learoyd Avenue, nearly at the end, just before it turns into Park Drive, that Mr. Oakroyd's adventures really began.

He had just stepped from the lamplit pavement into the shadow of a tree, when he tripped over something and went sprawling.

"What the bl——!" he began, startled and shaken.

"Shush! Shush!" said a voice, close to his ear. "Naughty! Naughty!"

Mr. Oakroyd scrambled to his feet and peered through the gloom at the figure beside him. "'Ere, Mister, get up."

The other giggled quietly. "Can't gerrup," he said. "Can't poshibly gerrup."

"Well, you can't stay there all t'night, Mister," said Mr. Oakroyd, who now understood the situation. "Can you now?"

"I dunno, I dunno," said the other meditatively. "P'raps I can, p'raps I can't. Who knows?" Then in a tone of great melancholy he added: "Nobody knowsh. And nobody—nobody—caresh. Nobody." He seemed to be overcome by the pathos of this reflection.

"Well, you've got a load on and no mistake," said Mr. Oakroyd. Then he reached out a hand. "Come on, come on. This'll nivver do. 'Oist yerself up."

"That's ri'. Gimme a hand, the hand of frien'ship. Up we go!" And, aided by Mr. Oakroyd, he struggled to his feet, clapped Mr. Oakroyd on the shoulder, nearly lost his balance again, and finally clung to his companion's arm and began staggering down the road. The lamplight revealed him as a large red-faced man, very smart in a light grey felt hat, check suit, and spats.

"You're a good fella," he cried. "A very good fella. And I—I'm a good fella too. Both good fellas. Wass'r name? Mine's George. I've

had a mos' extr'or—extra'or'—'stonishin' time. Mos' 'stonishin'. Been away nearly a week. Racesh. Yes, I'm a rayshing man. Been to Doncashter—all over. An' lucky ev'ry time, ev'ry ev'ry time. D'you know, d'you know"—and here George separated himself from his companion and stood swaying—"wha' I made thish week?" He waved a finger at Mr. Oakroyd, then repeated, quite sternly: "D'you know?"

"Nay, I don't know," replied Mr. Oakroyd, good-humouredly. "But I'll bet it were more ner I did."

"Well, I'll tell you," said George, gravely swaying. "I'll tell you. No, I won't, 'cos I've forgorren. But hundredsh, hundredsh an' hundredsh. Lucky, very very lucky. And now—here I am, here I am, my frien', home again." And he steadied himself by grasping Mr. Oakroyd's arm again.

"But where do you live, Mister?"

"Roun' the corner, roun' the corner. Had mosh 'stonishin' adventures, these lash few days. Came back in car. With palsh, goo' old palsh. But gone, all gone. We had li'l' dishpute. Fact is"—and he lowered his voice and almost rested his head on his companion's shoulder—"fact is, ol' man, they were drunk, yes, dr-r-unk. An' they dropped me out of the car. Bur I said to them, I says, 'I'm berrer without you 'cos you're all drunk and thish is reshpec—reshpec'able neighbererer-hood.' Thash wor I says, my frien', an' I think you'll agree thar it was well spoken—on my par'." These three last words came with a rush, for he had suddenly released his hold and had swung round alarmingly.

"Nay, that won't do, Mister," said Mr. Oakroyd, making a grab at him. "You'll nivver get home at that rate. Now where is it you live?"

"Jus' roun' the corner, roun' the good ol' Johnny Horner," replied George, with enthusiasm. "We're all ri', we're all ri'. You're a good fella. You been to racesh thish time?"

"No, I've not, nor nowhere else either for a long time. Hold up, Mister, hold up."

But George had swung right over and was now slowly collapsing against the railings. His legs slowly slid over the pavement, but he still kept on talking. "You're a wise man, a wise wise man—to stay at home." And he said this several times as his head sank lower and lower.

"Nay, brace up, brace up!" Mr. Oakroyd tried to pull him up but the man was heavy and a dead-weight now. For a moment it looked as if he were going to sleep, but Mr. Oakroyd gave him a series of nudges and shakings and at last succeeded in arousing him a little. After he had made an effort, and Mr. Oakroyd had put out all his strength to assist him, George rose very unsteadily to his feet and staggered one or two paces forward.

" 'Ere, what's this?" said Mr. Oakroyd, picking up an unusually bulky pocket-book. "This must be yours." And he handed it over.

The other waved it in the air. "My note case. Full, full to the brim with money. Hundredsh of pounds, hundredsh. Must have dropped ou' pocket." Then he came closer and held the pocket-book only about two inches from Mr. Oakroyd's nose. "I thank you. I thank you. Knew you were good fella. An honesh man. Come here," he added, ignoring the fact that it would be impossible for his companion to be any closer than he already was. Indeed, he himself stepped back a pace as he continued: "Come here. You gave me thish, I give you something. Yes, I do. Fair's fair. Thash George's motto." He fumbled in the pocket-book. "Come here. Hold hand out."

Mr. Oakroyd found himself clasping some crisp pieces of paper. They felt like banknotes, and there were four of them. He did not stop to examine them but held them out to the donor, who was busying himself with the pocket-book. "Look here, Mister, I can't take these," he said, for his code demanded that he should help a drunken man if he possibly could and also that he should not take advantage of a man's drunken freaks of generosity.

"Warrer say?" George was still busy fastening his pocket-book and putting it away.

"I say I can't take these," he repeated, almost pushing the notes in the other's face.

"Warrer mean can't take 'em? I tell you, I give 'em. I.i'l' presen' for good boy."

"If I take these," said Mr. Oakroyd earnestly and somewhat unwisely, "you'll be sorry in the morning."

This offended George. "Warrer mean sorry in the morning?" he

cried aggressively. "Money's mine, isn't it? Do warrer like with it, can't I? Can I or can't I? Ish it mine or ishn't it? Can I or can't I? Answer plain queshuns." And he brought his face as near as he could.

Mr. Oakroyd stepped back and began to feel impatient, but said nothing.

"Come on, come on. Le'sh have answer plain queshuns. Can I or can't I? Have I gorrer ask you warrer do with it?"

"Oh, don't be such a damn fool, Mister," cried Mr. Oakroyd, tired of this daft catechism.

"Damn fool, eh? All ri', all ri'. Thash finish, ab-so-lutely finish." And he made a sweeping gesture that nearly threw him off his feet. "You go to hell now, anywhere. Finish. No frien' o' mine." He turned away and staggered forward at a surprising pace.

Mr. Oakroyd, stuffing the notes in his pocket, hurried after him. "Half-a-minute, half-a-minute," he cried to the swaying figure.

The indignant George stopped for a moment to shout: "You go to hell. I don't want you. Don't you follow me." And off he went again, round the corner into Park Drive. A few yards farther on, he stopped again: "Don't you follow me. You're a bad fella, you are. You leave me alone." But Mr. Oakroyd only increased his pace and was almost up to him, when a large figure stepped out of a shadowy gateway and confronted the pair of them.

"'Ere, 'ere! What's all this about?" said the policeman, flashing his lamp on their faces.

George pulled himself up and saluted. "Good-evening, Conshtable. Jus' going home. You know me, don't you?"

The policeman took another look at him. "Yes, I think I know you, sir. You live down 'ere, don't you? Well, the sooner you're 'ome the better, if you ask me. And what's all this noise about? Who's this 'ere?"

"Thash the point," replied George gravely. "Who is he? I dunno who he is. I've jus' told him he's a bad fella, an' I don't want him following me. You tell him he's a bad fella."

The policeman flashed his lamp over Mr. Oakroyd again. "Now then, what's the game?"

"There's no game," said Mr. Oakroyd, rather sulkily. "I found him rolling drunk up the road and gave him a hand, that's all."

"Rollin' drunk!" exclaimed George, horror-stricken. "You're a bad bad fella, an' I told you not to keep following me."

"You be off," said the policeman to Mr. Oakroyd, "and leave him alone. And you get off home, sir, afore somebody else starts follering you. You've not far to go."

"Ay, ay, Cap'en." And George gave another salute and zigzagged down the road. Mr. Oakroyd moved on after him, but a shout from the policeman behind pulled him up.

"Didn't I tell you to be off?" cried the policeman, who had now caught up to him. "Get off and leave 'im alone afore you get into trouble."

"He's not the only chap as is going home." Mr. Oakroyd was indignant. "I've as much right to walk down this street as he has. I'm going home too. I'm not going to bother with him. He's daft drunk."

"Where d'you live?"

"Ogden Street."

"That's a good way from 'ere," said the policeman suspiciously.

"Ay, but this is nearest way to it, and that's all I care about."

"Well, walk on the other side then. I shall stand 'ere and watch you. And don't let me see you round 'ere again tonight."

"I don't want ivver to set eyes on thee agen, lad," Mr. Oakroyd muttered to himself as he crossed the road. He walked as fast as he could now, and took the first possible turning out of Park Drive. "I wonder who that were," he said to himself. "Eh, I've seen some silly drunks in my time, but I nivver saw one sillier." He had to slow down a little because his heart, which had been given a bump or two by that unpleasant talk with the policeman, kept missing a beat and seemed to make him short of breath. Thus it was very late indeed when he finally arrived at 51, Ogden Street, and even Leonard was obviously in bed.

He found a piece of buttered currant teacake, took a large and comforting bite out of it, and then smoothed out on the table four five-pound notes. Twenty pounds. Only twice before had he ever possessed such a sum, and then it had been scraped together, shilling added to shilling. But here was twenty pounds that had fallen to him out of the blue. What should he do with it? He crept upstairs, pondering.

IV

"An' serve 'im right, too," Mrs. Oakroyd muttered. "I haven't a bit of patience with him." It was the third time she had turned over this kipper, now blackened on both sides. It awaited, this kipper, the arrival of Mr. Oakroyd from work, being indeed the usual centrepiece of Monday evening's tea; but obviously it had long ceased to care whether he came or not. An hour earlier this kipper might have been said to be wasted on him. Now, as Mrs. Oakroyd has suggested, it could only be described as something that served him right. Mr. Oakroyd generally arrived home before six, but now it was after seven. His wife, who had been washing all day and had organised a particularly fine display of steaming clothes round the fire at a quarter to six, had lost more and more of her temper with every passing quarter of an hour. Had she known that four five-pound notes had found their way into her husband's pockets, late last night, she might have been alarmed. She knows nothing, however, and has not exchanged a dozen words with her husband, who has to rise very early and take both breakfast and dinner to the mill, since they disposed of the Sunday dinner. She is not alarmed but simply annoyed. "A body can't get on," she tells herself fretfully. Very soon she will have to prepare tea for Leonard, who will return from his first day at Gregson's to find a kipper, and a much larger and fatter kipper than the one we have already seen, waiting for him, done to a turn. Meanwhile, his father, like the nuisance he is, must take it into his head—for that is how Mrs. Oakroyd saw the matter—to be over an hour late.

"Not 'ome yet!" she cried to Mrs. Sugden, who had looked in from next door. "His tea's been ready nearly an hour and a half. Eh, men's a bother, they are! Is yours 'ome?"

"Long sin'," said Mrs. Sugden, a woman of few illusions. "Been and gone out again. Trust 'im! When 'e's more ner an half-hour late, I know I shan't see 'im afore all pubs an' clubs is closed. But that nivver happens o' Monday 'cos 'e has nowt. They can't be working over at Higden's, can they?"

"Not they!" Mrs. Oakroyd knew all about the state of the wool trade.

"They can't get a full week in, and a lot on 'em's been stopped. It's not that, I'm sure. Some piece o' silliness, I'll be bound."

"'E's 'ere," Mrs. Sugden whispered dramatically, then promptly vanished from the doorway.

The next moment he *was* there, a grimy, hot and angry man who flung his cap and his bag of joiner's tools down on the sofa, then closed the outer door with a bang.

"Where in the name o' goodness have you been?" his wife demanded. "And your tea waiting 'ere a full hour and a half!"

"Been on to t'Union office," he answered shortly.

She glanced at his face and then moderated her tone. "What d'you want to go there for at this time?"

"'Cos I've been stopped." He bent down and began to unlace his heavy working boots.

"You've been what?" his wife shrieked.

"Stopped, sacked, paid off, whativver you want to call it!" He straightened himself and threw an insurance card and some money on the table. "I'm not even under notice. Higden's has finished wi' me, and I've finished wi' them. There's a week's money there." He began to unlace the other boot.

"Well, I nivver did!" cried Mrs. Oakroyd. She flopped down into a chair and regarded him with the utmost astonishment. "What 'a' you been doing?"

"I'll tell you all about it in a minute. I want a wash and summat to eat." He marched in his stockinged feet towards the scullery. "Get my tea ready and then you'll soon know what I've been doing," he added grimly.

In Bruddersford wives do not stand on ceremony at such moments of crisis, and Mrs. Oakroyd, without a word of protest, made the tea and released the kipper from its long ordeal.

"If this 'ere fish had 'a' been by t'fire a minute longer," said Mr. Oakroyd, now seated at the table, "it 'ud 'ave started warping. It's like a bit o' burnt wood."

"Happen it's last you'll see for a bit," his wife retorted, having been roused by this gratuitous sally. "Never mind about that. What 'ave you gotten stopped for?"

"For nowt, just nowt," he began. "Or, if you like, for bein' a man and not a damned monkey." He stopped to take a drink of tea, then, pointing his fork at Mrs. Oakroyd, he resumed: "This morning I hadn't a waggon in, and so were doin' nowt for a bit. Simpson, t'under-manager, comes up an' ses, 'What are you on with, Oakroyd?' and I tells him, 'Nowt, just now.' They're puttin' up a temporary shed for t'waggons, and so Simpson ses 'Well, help wi' t'shed. You can start by getting this into shape.' And he points to a beam they pulled out o' t'old shed, and he finds measurements for me. So I borrows an axe an' a big cross-cut saw and gets to work on this 'ere beam. I haven't been at it more ner ten minutes when a chap taps me on t'back. I don't know him but I know he's one o' t'shop-stewards. 'An' when did you join t'Carpenters' Union, comrade?' he ses, very nasty. 'What d'you mean?' I ses, though I knew what was coming. He pointed to t'beam: 'That's a carpenter's job,' he ses, 'an' you keep off it, comrade.' I give him a look. 'Comrade!' I ses, 'My God!' 'I've noticed you once or twice,' he ses, 'an' it's struck me you've got the makings of a blackleg,' he ses. 'An summat else'll strike you in a minute, mate, if you stay here callin' me names,' I ses. 'Well, leave that job alone,' he ses, an' walks off. And of course I had to."

He paused for refreshment, and his wife stared at him and said that she didn't know whatever things were coming to.

"Well, let me finish," said Mr. Oakroyd, as if she had been preventing him. "So I'd nowt to do again. By an' by, Simpson comes round again, this time wi' manager hisself, old Thorley. They're takking a quick look round and seem a bit flustered. Thorley sees me. 'What's this man doing?' he asks. 'Eh, Oakroyd,' Simpson shouts across, 'get on wi' that job an' sharp about it.' 'I can't get on wi' it,' I shouts back, and moves across to tell 'em. 'Go on, man, go on, man, go on!' ses old Thorley, waving his hand at me, and out they goes. At dinner-time I hears that the great man hisself, Sir Joseph Higden, Bart.—an' his father were nobbut a weaving overlooker like mine—is on the premises. I knew now why t'managers were so flustered. 'I'll bet they're cuttin' summat down,' I ses. About three o'clock they lands in our department, Sir Joseph and Thorley, wi' Simpson behind. I see Sir Joseph wave his hand. Then Thorley looks round, an' I see him look at me and then say

summat to Simpson. In a minute or two, Simpson comes up an' ses 'I'm sorry, Oakroyd, but you'll 'a' to take a week's notice.' 'What for?' I ses. 'What have I done?' 'It's your own fault,' he ses, 'there's so many to be stopped, an' you shouldn't have let Mr. Thorley see you this morning.' 'It were no fault o' mine,' I ses, 'an' I'm going to have a word wi' Mr. Thorley.' And I did have a word wi' him, an' a fat lot o' good it did me. I begins to tell him how long I'd been there, an' he cuts me short an' ses some of us older men is as idle as young uns instead o' setting an example. That were enough for me, and I ses summat I shouldn't ha' said. 'Pay 'im off an' give him his card,' he ses. 'This man's finished wi' Higden's for good an' all.'"

"That comes o' not keeping a civil tongue in your head, Jess Oakroyd," said his wife reproachfully. "I've warned you afore now."

"What d'you think I'm made of?" demanded Mr. Oakroyd. "When a chap's called a blackleg in t'morning an' an idler i' t'afternoon, he's got to say summat. Well, I gets my week's money and my card at five o'clock, and sets off for t'Union office to tell my tale there. Secretary's not in. That's young Maundery, him as talks so much about the proletariat. I waits about and waits about. By and by in he comes, an' who's with him? That shop-steward, the comrade. In they come, laughing and talking, two bloody comrades together. A fat lot o' good my trying to tell 'em my tale! Started pulling me up right an' left. 'Notify' this, that an' t'other. 'Oh, you go to Hell,' I ses at finish. What wi' one an' another, and being badgered this way an' that, I hadn't a bit o' patience left. 'Oh, you go to Hell,' I ses, and marches out. And now you know."

His wife sat there rigid, her eyes fixed on his. For a few moments her face softened and she looked as if she were about to cry. But as she watched him dispose of the remainder of his tea, deal aggressively with a piece of pastry and a second cup, the hard lines came back into her face, the unfriendly gleam into her eyes. "Well, and what are you going to do now then?" she asked.

Mr. Oakroyd pushed aside his cup. It was a little gesture of despair. "Line up for t'dole till another job turns up."

"And 'ow long 'ull that be?"

"Don't ask me. You know what it is now. That bag o' tools 'ull be

there a long time, I'm thinking." He stood up now and looked across at his tools, lying on the sofa. Then he glanced down at his dirty old working clothes, and suddenly arrived, he knew not how or why, at a queer little decision. "I'm off upstairs to change my clothes," he announced, and departed.

When he came down again, he found his wife preparing Leonard's tea. He saw at a glance that she had made up her mind about something: her lips were tightly folded upon some recent decision. He waited for her to speak, turning, in his misery, to the old-time comfort of *Old Salt*.

"Well, that settles it," she began.

"What settles what?" he asked uneasily.

"Albert Tuggridge comes 'ere," she announced. Then, before he had time to do more than remove his pipe, she charged in, working herself up to a fury of justification. "Now, don't start on again, don't start on. You've just thrown your job away, you're not going to throw this away an' all, that you're not. If t'lad's still willing to come, 'ere he comes, and sooner the better. If it takes any more work, it'll be mine and I'll have it to stand, so it's more my business ner yours, and I say he can come. We've got to live, 'aven't we? You'd got little room to talk when you were in work, and you've less now."

"You might 'a' let me off Albert for this one night anyhow," he said quietly.

This only made her angrier. "It's got to be settled, 'asn't it? An' let me tell you this, if Albert don't come, Leonard might be going. I heard 'em saying summat t'other night. I don't think t'lad would leave his mother, but 'e might, wi' you always on to him. And then where should we be? Just when he's getting a good wage, too!"

So that was it. He was angry too now. "If Albert comes 'ere," he said firmly, "I go."

"Don't talk so soft. Where are you going? Are you going to live at t'Midland Hotel on your dole money?"

"Not so much about the dole! It's first time it's had to be mentioned in this 'ouse, let me tell you." He took his wounded pride to the door and there brooded over his pipe. When he swivelled his pipe from one

corner of his mouth to the other, his elbow set something rustling in his inside coat pocket. There were four five-pound notes there.

"'Ere we are at last, the old firm!" This was Leonard. His father followed him into the living-room. "Tea ready, Mar?" cried the youth, gaily. "That's the stuff!"

"Got on all right, Len?" asked his mother, bringing the large fat kipper from the fire.

"Ab-so-lutely! D'you know what I made in tips? Guess. Eight-and-threepence. Eight-shillings-and-threepence. Not so dusty. Good old Gregson's!" His mother poured out a cup of tea for the conquering hero.

"Good job we're gettin' it from somewhere," she remarked. "Your father's finished at Higden's."

"What's this?" A close observer might have noticed a subtle change at once in Leonard's manner.

His father, for once, was a close observer. "All right, all right," he said. "Give it a rest for a minute. Is that t'paper you've got there?" It was, and Mr. Oakroyd, claiming it, retired to a corner of the sofa, plodding steadily and miserably down the columns of the *Bruddersford Evening Express* and trying to shut his ears to the whispering of the other two at the table.

Quarter of an hour later, on arriving at the fifth page, it was not necessary for him to try to fix his attention on the paper. His attention was securely riveted there. He stared and stared at a report headed: *Street Robbery. Local Sportsman's Loss.* Phrases leaped up to meet his eye: "The well-known local sportsman, Mr. George Jobley . . . returning to his home in Park Drive, Merton Park, Bruddersford, last night . . . Mr. Jobley had been attending various race-meetings . . . had left his friends to walk the short distance to his home . . . attacked and robbed . . . at least £120 missing . . . strange affair . . . most important street robbery in Bruddersford for years . . . Mr. Jobley not injured but some shock." And the last sentence of all held his eye longest: "The police announce that they possess a valuable clue to the identity of the assailant." What was this?

"'Ere, who's this chap, George Jobley?" he demanded.

"That's the bookie feller that's been robbed," replied Leonard. "I know him well by sight. He's one o' the lads."

"What's 'e like?"

"Tallish feller with a red face. Always dressed in a check suit and spats. What's up?"

"Nowt!" Mr. Oakroyd returned untruthfully. George! He stared at the report again. "The police announce that they possess a valuable clue . . ." Nay, but a hundred and twenty pounds! It had nothing to do with him, nothing at all. There were a thousand things a perfectly innocent citizen might do to clear himself, but now Mr. Oakroyd could not consider them, for his little world was shaking, collapsing, and now another prop had been kicked away. One thing coming on top of another!

As if to confirm this, a voice came roaring from the doorway. "Hello, hello, hello, hello! Ev'rybody at 'ome, and smilin'! Oh, I do like a kipper for my tea! What'o, Len! 'Evening, Mrs. Oakroyd!" And who could this be but Albert?

"Oh, my God!" And groaning thus, Mr. Oakroyd flung down his paper and rose to his feet.

"Hello, hello!" cried Albert, still loudly but this time indignantly. "What 'ave I done wrong?"

"Take no notice of 'im, Albert." Mrs. Oakroyd gave her husband a furious glance, then, with an astonishing quick-change, smiled at her visitor. "Come in and sit yer down. You know you're welcome. An' another thing, if you want to stay 'ere, you can do."

"Oh!" cried her husband. "And who says so?"

"I say so."

"And so do I," Leonard added truculently.

Mr. Oakroyd took a quick step towards his son, who immediately dropped his truculence and, indeed, seemed to flinch, like a very small boy. But then Mr. Oakroyd pulled himself up and stood still, a man at bay, thinking hard. The next moment he had dashed upstairs.

Once there he began looking about him eagerly. "I must 'a' summat," he muttered. There was the suitcase, Mrs. Oakroyd's pride. No, he wouldn't take that. There was the old round tin trunk. Too heavy and cumbersome. Then he remembered the basket thing, and pulled it

out of the corner where it had been for the last fifteen years. It was very light and quite small, only eighteen inches long and a foot deep, and it would hold all he wanted to carry. Into this absurd receptacle—or at least one half of it, for the other half would have to be jammed on as a lid—he stuffed a nightshirt and a day shirt, three collars and some handkerchiefs, a muffler, a vest and a pair of pants, and his shaving kit. When he had jammed on the top half, he bethought him of his old mackintosh, and folded it round the little basket trunk before he fastened it with the strap, which was still intact and boasted of a holder for the hand. Then he put on a pair of strong boots and hurried downstairs, basket in hand, to confront three astonished faces.

"What in the name o' goodness——!" cried his wife.

"I'm off," he announced.

"Where to?" asked Leonard, still staring. "Yer can't go like that, Par. Where can you go to?"

"Never mind, never mind!" Mrs. Oakroyd was white with temper. "Let 'im go, let 'im go! Tryin' 'is tricks! 'E won't hear a word from me about stayin'. Let 'im go. 'E'll be in a diff'rent frame o' mind when 'e comes back. And that won't be so long either."

"You can do what you like wi' t'place now," said Mr. Oakroyd. "It's yer own. There's a week's money there and no doubt you'll manage after that."

"Manage!" cried his wife, in a fury of scorn. "Of course we can manage. Nivver better off. You've been wanting a lesson some time and now you're runnin' to get it. Go on, go on."

Mr. Oakroyd said nothing, but moved over to the sofa and took up his bag of tools, dumping it beside the basket trunk. Then he stuck his old brown cap at the back of his head, and prepared to depart.

"'Ere," said Albert, pointing to the table. "What about that?"

"That's right," said Leonard. "You'll 'ave to 'ave that." And he held out the insurance card.

Mr. Oakroyd stood staring at the greenish-blue card in his hand, staring as if he were in a dream. *Man—Age 16 to 65 . . . Failure to surrender this card promptly . . . If the Insured Person . . . The Insured Person . . .* All so familiar and yet so strange. He stood staring, baffled, lost in the dark of a world of notices and notifying, of sneering Com-

rades and stupid autocratic managers, of buzzers that kept your feet from the road, of signs that could never be hoisted, of daughters that grew up, laughing and singing, and then vanished over the sea. Then something inside him flared and went shooting through this bewildered dark like a rocket, and Mr. Oakroyd committed a crime.

"Oh, to hell wi' t'card!" he cried, and tore it across and threw the pieces into the fire. Then, leaving horror-stricken amazement behind him, he picked up his bag of tools and his little basket trunk and made for the door.

"Now you've done it," they were crying. "Where yer going?"

"Down South," he replied, and vanished into the night.

Chapter Two

MISS TRANT TAKES A HOLIDAY

I

Once more we look down upon English hills, lit by the same September sun. But it is another England; the dark Pennines have been left far behind; the grim heights of ling and peat and black rock, the reeking cauldrons that were the valleys, all have vanished. Here are pleasant green mounds, heights of grass forever stirring to the tune of the southwest winds; clear valleys, each with its gleam of water; grey stone villages, their walls flushing to a delicate pink in the sunlight; parish churches that have rung in and rung out Tudor, Stuart, and Hanoverian kings; manor houses that have waited for news from Naseby and Blenheim and Waterloo and Inkerman and Ypres, then have let their windows blaze through the night or have suddenly grown still and dark, but have kept their stones unchanged; and here and there, in the wider valleys, little woods where you could play *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and gardens shaped and coloured, to the last inch of lawn cross-gartered with stone paths, from the tallest hollyhock to the smallest rose-bush, for the music and happy folly of *Twelfth Night.* This is, indeed, another England, this green and windy outpost of Arden. Over to the west, beyond the deep channels of the rivers, is the Welsh Border country, a Celtic place, with hills as dark and mysterious as a fragment of Arthurian legend. But here, in the Cotswolds, all is open and pleasant, a Saxon tale of grass and grey stone, wind and clear running water. We have quitted the long war of the north. Here is a place of compromise, for Nature has planed off her sharp summits and laid down green carpets in place of bog and heather and rock, and man has forsworn his mad industrial antics, has settled himself modestly and snugly in the valleys and along the hillsides, has

trotted out his sheep and put up a few tiny mills, and has been content. Yes, these two signed a peace here, and it has lasted a thousand years.

Chipping Campden is to the north of us, Cirencester to the south, Burford to the east, and Cheltenham to the west. This grey cluster of roofs, with the square church tower in the middle, is almost equidistant from all those four admirable townships. It is the village of Hitherton-on-the-Wole. Sometimes motorists, hurrying from lunch at Oxford to tea at Broadway or Chipping Campden, lose their way and find themselves at Hitherton, and the little books prepared for their use tell them at once that Hitherton has 855 inhabitants, closes early on Wednesday, empties its letter-box at 5.30 P.M., boasts an hotel, *The Shepherd's Hall* (3 bedrooms) and a garage, J. Hurley & Son, and has at least one thing worth looking at, for the account closes with the command—*See Church*. Very few of them do stay to see the church, though the rector, the Rev. Thomas J. S. Chillingford, has not only written a short history of it but has also published this history as a pamphlet: *Reprinted from the "Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archeological Society";* and any visitor who appreciates an extraordinarily fine rood-screen when he sees one (to say nothing of two possible leper-windows on the north side) cannot fail to obtain a copy of this pamphlet. But away they go, these motorists, and never once turn their heads to remark, with Mr. Chillingford, that the church "from a distance suggests a brooding-mother-bird with head erect." Thus when any strange and expensive-looking motor car stops there, everybody in Hitherton, with the exception of Mrs. Farley of *The Shepherd's Hall* and J. Hurley and Son, who are always hopeful, prepares at once to point the way to other and more important places.

There are some days, however, when people do not lose their way and find themselves in Hitherton but deliberately go there and stay there. This is one of the days. For the last three weeks the countryside has been plastered with notices saying that Messrs. Medworth, Higgs and Medworth would sell by auction and without reserve the remaining effects of the Old Hall, Hitherton-on-the-Wole. Well-informed people—and almost everybody in Hitherton is well-informed—have been telling one another ever since old Colonel Trant died, several months ago, that there was sure to be a sale. It was known for certain that

the Trants were not so well-off as they used to be. It was known too that Miss Elizabeth Trant, who had looked after her father ever since her mother's death, fifteen years ago, would not live on at the Hall but at the Cottage. Miss Elizabeth had been left everything, it was said, though she was the youngest of the Colonel's three children. But then she well deserved everything the Colonel could leave her—indeed, deserved more than that—for had she not stayed on in Hitherton and looked after him in his old age? And in the last years he must have been a trial, too. He had had to miss the last two Flower Shows and could not even hobble to church, the poor old gentleman. It was a blessing when he found his way in the end to the churchyard. And Miss Trant, who must be about thirty-seven, though being so straight and slim and fair she does not look it, had taken care of him year after year and had hardly left the village for more than a night this long time; whereas her brother, who was some sort of judge in India, and her sister, who had married well and lived in London, rarely came near the place. Everybody knew that what with the Colonel's retired pay going and debts to be paid off and one thing and another, Miss Trant would have less than £200 a year for herself. That was why she intended to live at the Cottage, to which all the things she wanted had already been removed, and why all that remained at the Old Hall, now to be let, was being sold by auction.

It is a long time since Medworth, Higgs and Medworth last descended upon Hitherton. This is a great day. Any number of cars have gone up to the Old Hall. Already Mrs. Farley has had to open another bottle of whisky, and J. Hurley and Son have had to mend two punctures and see what they could do with a very queer magneto. People, quite ordinary people, not dealers, have come from as far as Bourton-on-the-Water and Winchcombe and Great Barrington. As for dealers, they have come from the ends of the earth. There are at least two from Cheltenham and three from Oxford and one from Gloucester, all proper antique dealers and not merely grocers and drapers who keep a room upstairs filled with second-hand furniture. Not that there are not any of them here, for of course there are quite a number. And it is said that there is one man, the one with eyeglasses and a pointed beard, who represents some big London firm. He did not come down specially, for

it is his business to tour the country, but here he is. Then for every one of these professional buyers there must be at least twenty amateurs, local people who have come to see if they can pick up a bit of china or a bedstead. Last of all, there are all the people who have not come to buy anything, but to see what the Old Hall looks like inside, to walk round the garden, to turn things over and over and get in the way, to enjoy themselves. These visitors, many of whom have brought all their children, easily outnumber the others, and just as they were the first to arrive, so they will be the last to go. "Always the same, always the same!" cried Mr. James Medworth to the protesting Miss Trant. "They *will* come, and there's no stopping 'em." Mr. Medworth has spent years pushing his way through rooms crowded and overheated with these people, and now regards their presence as something inevitable. Still, they laugh at his little jokes, and Mr. Medworth has a stock of little jokes. He is a middle-aged man with a very wide mouth and a glitter of large protruding teeth, so that he looks like a jovial shark. Miss Trant does not like him, but is quite willing to believe her solicitor, Mr. Truby of Cheltenham, who says: "Smart man, Medworth. Smart man. Keen people."

She was there at the Hall this morning, when people began to arrive and look round, but did not stay very long. She is not very sentimental and all her own cherished possessions have been removed to the Cottage, but nevertheless she discovered that the sudden disintegration of a home, however desolating that home might have been sometimes, into a mere jumble of objects, gave her no pleasure. All the things now looked so naked, so helpless. "Awful lot o' junk here," she heard one man say to another, dealers every inch of them; and she hurried round the corner, only to run into that familiar steel engraving of Lord Raglan, now Lot 117, and to find that his lordship was glaring into vacancy, cutting her dead. But all the things were like that, either indignant or wistful. She retired, wishing she had taken more of them to the Cottage, though she knew very well that the Cottage was too full already.

She found Mrs. Purton putting the Cottage in order, and spent the next hour or two helping her. Mrs. Purton had been cook at the Hall, and her husband—and his father before him—had been gardener, and now they had both been transferred, for the time being, to the Cottage.

Mrs. Purton "didn't 'old with auctioneering," apparently regarding it as a frivolous pastime, and so she had stayed at home all day. But Purton was up at the Hall, partly because he was a sociable man and had no intention of missing such an event, and partly because he was also very loyal and believed that his presence would put a stop to any thieving, particularly in the kitchen garden. So in order that no vegetables should be taken, he was spending his time following the auctioneer round from room to room, apparently convinced that it was Mr. Medworth, his clerks, and the dealers, who would want watching. It was Purton who brought news of the sale.

"Is it all over, Purton?" cried Miss Trant, as soon as she saw him coming down the garden.

He came up, touched his cap, then, putting his hands in his trousers pockets, he began swaying back from the hips. This was his favourite attitude when he had anything important to say, so that Miss Trant, who knew her man, realised at once that he was bursting with news. Not that he looked excited. You cannot expect a gardener who for the last six years has won the first prize for onions (Ailsa Craigs)—to say nothing of any number of minor events—at the Hitherton and District Show, to betray his feelings.

"No, Miss, rightly speaking, it isn't over," he replied. "But what's left don't amount to much. A lot o' people's goin' now. But that thar bit of a sideboard that stood in the 'all, that old un——" and he stopped talking only to sway more violently.

"You mean the Tudor one. I know. I couldn't find a place for it here, Purton, and they say it's very valuable. What happened to it?"

"A 'undred and forty pound," announced Purton, staring at her solemnly. "A 'undred and forty pound, that's just fetched."

"Isn't that splendid, Purton!" Miss Trant looked at him with shining eyes, and did not seem a day older than twenty.

He stopped swaying, removed one hand from its pocket, and held up three fingers very impressively. "Three of 'em after it at the finish, that's all—three! Dealers they was. An Oxford feller, and a Cheltenham feller, and a little chap with a beard that's come from London. Three of 'em! And they 'ardly says a word, 'ardly a word. Never see anything like it!"

"What did they do then?"

"Winks. Just winks." And Purton produced three of them too, very slow and solemn affairs, to show her how it was done, and then stared at her while she tried hard not to giggle. "Mr. Medworth, 'e says 'Goin' at ninety' and then one of 'em winks, and Mr. Medworth says 'Ninety-five' and looks at another of 'em, gets a wink and 'as it up to a hundred. 'And five' says the chap with a beard, and then they starts winkin' again, and then it's winked right up to one 'undred and forty pound. 'E's done well, 'as that thar sideboard."

"I never thought it was worth as much as that, Purton."

"You wouldn't think so, Miss, would you—just a bit of an old sideboard," said Purton, speaking very confidentially. "It wouldn't surprise me if it woren't. It's this 'ere competition that does it. Carries you away. You think you must 'ave it. I once found meself landed with ten runner ducks that I no more wanted nor thought o' buying when I went up and 'ad a look at the chap selling 'em than I thought o' buying a ring-tailed monkey. Got carried away. Plenty 'as been carried away this afternoon up at that thar auctioning. Mr. Medworth says it's a good sale. I'll be back thar, Miss, as soon as I've had a bit to eat. I'll 'elp to clear up. There'll be a nasty mess when they've done, I know."

For the first time that day, Miss Trant began to feel excited about the Sale. Mr. Medworth had told her that it was impossible for him to say beforehand what the things would fetch; it all depended on the number of people who came, the sort of people and the mood they were in; and the whole lot might go for less than five hundred pounds, but on the other hand it might realise something like a thousand. It was impossible to doubt anything that Mr. Medworth said about such matters. Miss Trant had tried, with some measure of success, to regard the whole proceeding as so much dull routine—one of the innumerable dreary things that had had to be done since her father died—but now she realised that this was a gigantic gamble, a homely Monte Carlo, got up for her benefit. The difference between a good sale and a bad one might mean a difference of several hundred pounds, which in their turn could add a pound or two a month to her income. You could work it out in grades of China tea or silk stockings, that difference. And now it was being decided. She walked up and down the little Cottage gar-

den, her head humming with addition and subtraction as it had done many a time these last few years, when she had had to pay all the bills and keep the accounts for her father. She was poorer now but she did not feel poorer. Actually she felt vaguely rich. "It's because I've heard so much *talk* about money," she told herself, thinking of the discussions she had had with Mr. Truby in his Dickens-ish little office, and then, more recently, with Mr. Medworth, who was at once too teethy and jovial to be a gentleman.

She saw Purton return to the Hall, but did not follow him. After a restless half hour or so in the Cottage, mostly spent in picking things up, walking about with them, and then putting them down again, she went to the bottom of the garden. The village below seemed to be full of cars, hooting through the main street and then roaring away to the Oxford or Cheltenham roads. The Sale must be all over now. She would walk across and see.

When she approached the Hall, picking her way through a smelly muddle of people and cars and vans, the glorious September afternoon seemed to change at once. Its ripe gold became hot and dusty gilt. The Hall itself seemed smaller in this strange atmosphere, made up of straw and string and petrol and stares and silly jokes and perspiring bargainers. The place gaped vacantly, like a once handsome old idiot. As she skirted the crowd in front and made her way to a side door, she had a glimpse of certain familiar tables and chairs and pictures now being lifted into vans and carts, and that glimpse made her feel, as nothing that had happened before during these last few months had made her feel, that her life indeed was changed, beginning all over again. Those things had seemed more fixed and inevitable than the constellations, and now they were being hurried through the dust. They too were beginning all over again. And before she had reached the side door, she found herself choking a little, close to tears. She brushed past the men who were sweeping up the litter in the passages and made for the hall itself, the glory of the house. There she disturbed the rector, Mr. Chillingford, who was peering at the woodwork through a large reading glass.

He looked up, startled. "Hello! I had to have a look at this panelling at the back, now that I can see it properly. I knew it was different

from the rest. I told my wife it was only this morning. Not that she said it wasn't, of course, because she's not interested in this sort of thing." Then he brought his round red innocent face closer to hers, and said, more gently: "You look worried, Elizabeth. All this hasn't been very pleasant for you, has it? You shouldn't have come here; you should have kept out of the way, my dear."

"I suppose I ought," she replied vaguely. "But I have kept out of the way most of the time. And I'm not feeling what you think I'm feeling. It's not sentiment about this place that's worrying me." She stopped, then smiled at him rather wanly.

"You're like Dorothy and all the other young people I know nowadays," he said. He always thought of Elizabeth Trant as a contemporary of his daughter and her friend, though actually she was ten years older. He saw her as a tall brisk schoolgirl who would one day become a woman. It was something undeveloped, immature, sexless, in her that fostered such conceptions. "Yes, you're like the rest," he continued. "You think there's something to be ashamed of in sentiment. That's why it seems to be dying out, leaving the world. But I don't see myself that the world will be a better place without it. Not a bit, not a bit! It'll be a worse place. So don't you be ashamed of your feelings, my dear." And he gave her a little pat or two on the shoulder.

"I'm not. I'm only trying to be honest about them. And it really is something quite different."

"What is it then?" he enquired indulgently.

"I don't know—quite. It's too complicated." But she did know, though she had neither the will nor the words at her command to tell him. It was not because something had ended for her but because she had just seen how it ended that she was so troubled, so close to tears. It seemed as if her father's life had not come to its end in the churchyard there, but here and now, in the dust and straw and shouting, had been bargained and frittered away into oblivion this very afternoon. She seemed to have had a sudden terrible glimpse of life as it really was, and was ready to weep at the thought of its strange dusty littleness.

"All the things you really want, of course, have been removed to the Cottage?" Mr. Chillingford knew very well they had, but the question seemed to him to have a certain consolatory value.

"Yes, everything," she told him, and stared at the fantastically empty hall, into which the heavy sunlight came oozing.

"And I'm told it's been a splendid sale, a splendid sale," he added cheerfully, as they walked together to the front door.

Just outside, Mr. Medworth himself was glittering and booming and mopping his brow. At the sight of Miss Trant, he triumphantly raised a hand. "A very successful afternoon, I'm told," said Mr. Chillingford, opening the subject for him.

"Couldn't be better, couldn't be better," he cried, and then looked so business-like that Mr. Chillingford hurried away at once. "We're just finishing off now, Miss Trant, the figures, y'know. Over a thousand, I'm confident of that. Yes, over a thousand."

"Why, that's even more than you thought it would come to, even at the best, isn't it?" Miss Trant felt rich again, in spite of her sober acquaintance with figures.

"Well, I wouldn't say that because I'm never surprised, never," Mr. Medworth said, very judicially. "But we've been lucky today, very lucky. Some keen men here, real competition. And"—here he lowered his voice and hid his teeth—"it was lucky you took my advice about the walnut pieces and left them in. Worth far more to these fellows than they are to you. All a fashion!"

"Did they sell very well, then?"

"Fetched ridiculous prices, ridiculous! Knew they would, if we got the right people here. That little bureau went up to thirty-five. Three of 'em after every piece." And Mr. Medworth continued in this strain for the next ten minutes, at the end of which he had to break off because he found a mass of documents thrust under his nose.

"We've got it now," he announced, five minutes later. "One thousand and sixty-five pounds, fourteen shillings and sixpence, that's what we make it. That's less our commission, y'know. All your own, Miss Trant, eh? Yes, all your own. Shall we settle up with Mr. Truby? Ah yes, I'll settle with Mr. Truby tomorrow. Good!" He turned away as if to depart and then swept round again so quickly that he made Miss Trant feel dizzy. "The house," he cried, lifting a long fat forefinger. "We mustn't forget that. They're cleaning it up now, and tomorrow, Miss Trant, perhaps you could get a woman or two in to

finish it off. And a gardener to tidy up. You could, eh? I'll tell you why. We're going to get rid of the house sooner than I thought. Enquiry came in yesterday, and I'll send 'em over day after tomorrow. How's that for you? Send some one with 'em, of course, but thought you might like to show 'em round a bit yourself. Sure you don't want to sell? No. Quite right, quite right. Well, we'll stick at a hundred and fifty, not a penny less. Get it easily, best house in the district. Day after tomorrow then, morning if possible. And settle with Mr. Truby. Good afternoon, Miss Trant. Go-od afternoon. Here, where's Charlie?" But this last shout was not intended for Miss Trant, and now we have finished with Mr. Medworth.

Miss Trant returned to the Cottage, richer by the sum of one thousand and sixty-five pounds, fourteen shillings and sixpence. She walked quickly and erectly down the lane, then tidied up the Cottage and tidied up herself, dealt justly with an excellent cold supper, wrote a few letters and read a chapter or two before going, rather earlier than usual, to bed; and nobody who saw her could have guessed what she was feeling. Here was the trim, the brisk, the efficient Miss Trant that everybody knew, with not a single hair of that light-brown and unbobbed mass disturbed. Nevertheless, she felt as if she were lost.

"It's weak and silly to feel like this," she told herself firmly. "In the morning, I must begin all over again." Before she could do more than turn over a few vague plans, she was asleep, dreaming perhaps of the long-deferred payment of life to her youth, that youth which the calendar, lying to her bright face, said had slipped by. And now Hitherton was itself again, quiet under the glimmer of stars. There were no cars parked in the main street. The last van had shaken itself from the Hall long ago. J. Hurley and Son had closed the garage and were celebrating their victory over the queer magneto by eating a large late supper of cold potato pie. In the taproom of *The Shepherd's Hall,* Purton was finishing his final half-pint and also the whole question of dealers' winks. The dealers themselves, the little buyers, the sight-seers, had long dispersed, and with them all the chairs and tables and chests of drawers and china and guns and books and steel engravings and Indian screens and Burmese gongs, all gone out to strange places, leaving their Colonel resting in the churchyard, and his daughter

sleeping under this roof of her own, still in familiar Hitherton and yet perhaps really in a new world.

II

The next morning, Miss Trant, looking through her window at the radiant vapour, decided that the day would be fine and that it should be honoured by her golden-brown jumper suit, a recent and triumphant find in Cheltenham. In the little dining-room, polished and trim and full of sunlight, she found a picture postcard awaiting her. On one side were the Glastonbury ruins. On the other was some equally ruinous and picturesque handwriting: "Isn't this appalling? Must have been invented for Americans. Can I descend upon you some time tomorrow, dinner-ish? Love, Hilary." This was her nephew, the only son of the Indian Judge. He had recently come down from Oxford. Miss Trant looked very thoughtful over this card. She was not sure whether she wanted to entertain Hilary or not.

Before she could make up her mind whether Hilary would be a pleasure or a nuisance, Mrs. Purton waddled in, set down a boiled egg, a toast-rack, and a teapot, and then proceeded in a very leisurely fashion to explode a bomb.

"They do say, Miss——" Mrs. Purton began, and then stopped, holding, as it were, the smoking bomb in her hand.

Miss Trant smiled at her. "Well, what are they saying now? Don't frighten me, Mrs. Purton."

"They do say——" she stopped again. Then it came—bang! "Miss Chillingford, Miss Dorothy, 'as just got herself engaged to be married."

"What!" Miss Trant nearly shrieked. "It can't be true. I've never heard anything about it."

"It come this morning in a letter," said Mrs. Purton, enjoying herself. "Mrs. Chillingford she tells it to Agnes, and Agnes tells it to young Cripps as brings the milk, and young Cripps tells it to me. And she'll 'ave to be married very soon and then go out to Asia or India or Jamaikie or one o' them places, 'cos it's a young gentleman as works there."

"I wonder who it is?" Miss Trant stared at Mrs. Purton's plump red face as if she might find the name written there.

"That I *don't* know, Miss." Mrs. Purton took her tray and turned to go. "And one o' them cars as come for furniture last night got stuck in a ditch on the Cheltenham road. Drunk, I'll be bound!" And she made her favourite exit, nodding her head like a minor prophet.

Miss Trant cared nothing about the fate of cars on the Cheltenham road, but the news of Dorothy Chillingford's engagement, totally unexpected, left her a little dazed. Her plans, vague as they were, had counted upon Dorothy's companionship or, at least, neighbouring high spirits. She felt hurt, too, at not being told, that is, not being told properly. She debated whether to look in at the Chillingfords', but decided against it. "If Mrs. Chillingford doesn't arrive within an hour," she told herself, "I shall know there's nothing in it, just village gossip." Purton was up at the Hall, restoring order in the big garden, and so she took his place for the morning among the Cottage flower beds.

She had not very long to wait. As soon as she saw Mrs. Chillingford's agile little figure between the grenadier lines of hollyhocks, she knew that she had heard no mere idle rumour. "Good morning, my dear," Mrs. Chillingford gasped. "I came round to ask you over to tea this afternoon." Dorothy's engagement was written all over her.

This was a moment worthy of Mrs. Chillingford. She was a small stringy woman, with no shoulders and rheumatic joints but with a fighting face, hooked nose and snapping eyes, and an indomitable spirit. The rector himself, so long as such subjects as leper-windows, the University Commission, and Anglo-Catholicism were avoided, was one of the most placid of mortals, and there are few quieter places in this island than Hitherton. Yet Mrs. Chillingford had contrived to turn her life there into a saga. From Monday morning to Saturday night she flung out ultimatums, mobilised, gave battle, and then shot into church on Sunday to hymn her victories and send glances like bayonets to right and left of her while her husband in the pulpit murmured of peace. Visitors newly arrived from the North-Western Frontier or the Central American republics found themselves hastily revising their notions of English country life after an hour in her company, and soon returned to London for a rest. There was just one period, lasting about six months, when she lost all her zest for conflict and was very quiet indeed, perhaps because she found it so difficult to understand that John Chilling-

ford was in future to be only a name on the village War memorial; and then the good people of Hitherton and neighbourhood discovered a peace that made the subsequent Armistice a mere anti-climax. But it was a disquieting sort of peace, and perhaps they were not altogether sorry when their rector's wife became herself again. When she did come to the end of those six months, buried away that strangely acquiescent little woman in black, there was no holding her at all. Commissioners, recruiting officers, great ladies, even Bishops and Lords Lieutenant, were sent reeling back. And that mild and not unwise man, the Rev. Thomas Chillingford, never uttered a word of reproof but even gently suggested new adversaries and hinted from time to time, he who had never an enemy, that he was in great need of her help, almost at bay. But for a year or two now Mrs. Chillingford had had to carry on her saga almost unaided by circumstance, doing what she could with Flower Show Committee meetings and the like; here at last was an event, and it found her worthy.

"Yes, it's true, and I was to tell you at once. His name's Atkinson, Gerald Atkinson—you may have met him; he was down here once, staying with the Horrocks. Dorothy has been seeing him in town, of course, but even then it's rather sudden, but no worse for that, of course, not at all. He has an estate—coffee or something—in Kenya, and they're to be married almost at once because he must go back there very soon. And he's nearly two years younger than Dorothy—not that that matters, of course—and apparently his people, who still command the purse-strings, don't approve—did you ever hear of such a thing!"

Now that Mrs. Chillingford stopped for breath, Miss Trant had time to wonder whether Dorothy had not invented this opposition on the part of his family, the slightest mention of which instantly made her mother heart and soul for the match. If she had been told that the Atkinsons approved, she would probably have commanded Dorothy to come home at once. But all Miss Trant said was: "Yes, I think I remember him. Tall and fair, wasn't he? He didn't seem at all too young for Dorothy." As a matter of fact, if it was the youth she was thinking of, he didn't seem too young for anybody. He was a very old youth indeed.

"Of course not!" cried Mrs. Chillingford. "But then, I don't expect

to hear any nonsense of that kind. I don't know what I do expect to hear, but I'm going up to town in the morning and shall see for myself. Dorothy can count upon me, if there are fifty thousand Atkinsons there. Some of these people seem to imagine they can keep their children in leading-strings all their lives. They've bought this boy an estate out there—the poor boy has to do something and apparently he's been very successful, the first year—and now they think they can dictate to him about his marriage. Leading-strings!"

"And what has Dorothy decided to do about everything?" Miss Trant asked meekly.

"You mean about the date of the wedding, place, clothes, going out there, and so on? I don't know what the child has decided because she knows better than to announce decisions on such a matter as this to me. I shall go up myself and do the deciding tomorrow. This is a mother's business. There'll be a great deal to do, a great deal, and very little time to do it in, unless of course I decide that the whole thing ought to be postponed. I shan't do that, I think. What are you smiling at, Elizabeth?"

Miss Trant bent down to remove a trowel. "I was just thinking," she answered, not altogether truthfully, "how you're going to enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself with all this fuss!" Then Mrs. Chillingford met her friend's amused gaze, and laughed. "Well, perhaps I shall. She's in love with him, I can see that. Don't forget tea."

Miss Trant sighed as she turned again to her flower beds. It was not a sentimental sigh. She was certainly not conscious of any desire to be engaged herself. She did not envy her friend, Dorothy; indeed, she felt rather compassionate and at the same time a little irritated, because she remembered Gerald Atkinson now and thought Dorothy was throwing herself away upon him. But then she did not pretend to know a great deal about these affairs of the heart, and really found them rather uninteresting. Her own life had never been disturbed by grand passions, and such relations as she had had with young men had been cool and friendly. There was one exception. It had happened twelve years ago, when she and her father had returned from Malta all the way by boat. She had not been well, and the ship's

doctor, a tall bony young Scot, had been called in to examine her. He was gruff and shy at first, with an honesty as plain as daylight, but they soon became friends, trod the upper deck together every morning and quietly explored one another's mind and heart every night. The last two days it had become quite exciting; every glance, every word, became electrical, significant; and then, with the land in sight, he had suddenly changed, turned gruff and shy again, and he had let her go without saying anything, had just given her a handshake that hurt and backed away with a ghastly sort of grin. His name was Hugh McFarlane; his voice was very deep and very Scotch, one of those that bring out huge vowels and smashing consonants; and when he turned his face towards the light there was a fascinating glint of hair about his cheek-bones. There was nothing about him she had forgotten, and though she rarely thought of him, perhaps he served as a secret standard in her judgment of young men. Thus, it suddenly occurred to her that he was worth at least six Gerald Atkinsons.

But the sigh was not for him, nor was it for Dorothy. It was just a breath coming from a kind of emptiness. She was beginning to feel a little lost again. The feeling had not gone when she crossed to the Chillingfords' for tea.

"Elizabeth, you need a change," said Mr. Chillingford, wagging a finger at her. "I've been keeping my eye on you lately, and you need a change."

"Take my advice, my dear," said Mrs. Chillingford, "and leave this place as soon as you can. We shall miss you, of course, but you ought to go."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Cheltenham. Oxford. London. It doesn't matter. Sell everything you have—I mean stocks and shares and things—and start in business. That's what I should do in your place. Never hesitate a moment. Go slap into business." Mrs. Chillingford said this with immense gusto, then went slap into a piece of sandwich cake.

"I've thought of it, you know," said Miss Trant. "But what could I do? I don't know anything."

"Of course you do. Try this cake. You could open a shop and sell hats or gowns, like Betty Waltham."

"Yes, but I've always been told that I haven't very good taste." This sounded very feeble, she thought, but Miss Trant was nothing if not honest. Nevertheless, she believed in her heart of hearts that she had very good taste.

"Nonsense! You've splendid taste," cried Mrs. Chillingford, who very notoriously had none at all. She went on to discuss other shops and girls who had marched out of the most aristocratic country houses to open them.

"So far as I can see, my dear," remarked her husband, lighting his pipe, "it's only myself and this parish and perhaps—er—a certain lack of capital that are preventing you from becoming a second Selfridge or Woolworth." And he chuckled.

"Perhaps it is," replied Mrs. Chillingford, briskly. "I know I wish I had Elizabeth's opportunities."

"Now for my part," he added, turning to Miss Trant, "I think the only opportunity you ought to trouble yourself about just now is that of going away for a little rest and change. A little travel, now. What about Italy?"

"Somehow I haven't the slightest desire to go to Italy," said Miss Trant.

"I should hope not." Mrs. Chillingford was very emphatic. "Don't, for goodness' sake, Elizabeth, turn yourself into one of those terrible unmarried females who spend their time in Italy. Look at Agatha Spinthorpe and her sister. And the Murrells. No, anything but that."

"Italy then is condemned. We obliterate the whole peninsula," said Mr. Chillingford, with mild irony. He puffed away dreamily for a few moments, then went on: "Now if I were in your place, I should do something I've always wanted to do. I should have a little tour —well, perhaps not so very little, when you think of it—visiting all our English cathedrals. You may not be very interested in ecclesiastic architecture——"

"I don't think I am, you know," Miss Trant murmured.

"Possibly not." Mr. Chillingford was unperturbed. "But think what a wonderful picture of England you would have. Canterbury, Ely, Norwich, Lincoln, York, supposing you begin at that corner. A wonderful picture! You cross over to this side. Hereford, Gloucester, Wells,

Salisbury, and so forth. Wonderful!" His plump face was alight with enthusiasm.

Miss Trant found herself faintly kindled. "It does sound rather exciting when you think of it like that. And I've hardly seen any of those places."

"It's been a favourite project of mine for years," he said gravely.

"It's the first I've ever heard of it," cried Mrs. Chillingford. "And I must say it sounds very dull to me. If there's one kind of town more like another, it's a cathedral town. Don't take any notice of him, my dear."

They juggled with cathedrals and shops a few minutes longer, and then Miss Trant went back to the Cottage and spent the next hour and a half with *Redgauntlet,* which she was reading for the fourth time. She had a passion for historical romances, not silly sentimental stories passing themselves off under cover of a few cloaks and daggers and "halidoms" or "Odds-fish," but real full-blooded historical tales. These she preferred to any other kind of fiction, and for the last twenty years they had been first her delight and then her solace. She loved to carry a secret message from Louis the Eleventh of France to Charles, Duke of Burgundy; to journey to Blois in foul weather crying vengeance on the Guises; to peep out of a haystack at Ireton's troopers; to hide in the heather after Prince Charlie had taken ship to France; to go thundering over the Rhine with Napoleon and his marshals. To exchange passwords, to rally the Horse on the left, to clatter down the Great North Road, to hammer upon inn doors on nights of wind and sleet, these were the pleasures, strangely boyish, of her imagination. Few people who came upon Miss Trant sitting erectly with a book ever imagined for a moment that she was happily engaged in drinking confusion to the League or firing a matchlock. But such was her taste. Neither the labourious satire nor the luscious sentiment of our present fiction gave her any pleasure. She liked a tale to open at once, in the very first chapter, a little door through which she could escape and have bright sexless adventures. Novels about unmarried women who lived in the country, looking after aged parents or making do in genteel cottages, depressed her so much that she took pains to avoid them.

She had to dine with *Redgauntlet,* and it was after nine when she

heard Hilary's car wandering uneasily about the village. It was nearly ten by the time they had put away the two-seater in the Hall garage, walked back to the Cottage, and settled themselves in the little drawing-room.

"Well, Hilary, now you must tell me all the news." But before he could reply, she went on: "You know, I think you frighten me."

"Do I really? How splendid!" cried Hilary, in his high clear voice. He did not ask why he frightened her because he could see innumerable reasons himself.

She replied, however, without being asked. "Now don't be flattered," she continued. "It isn't exactly because you're an important young man from Oxford, though that has something to do with it. It's because I've seen you change so quickly, from a little boy——"

"Oh, it's that!" Hilary was disgusted.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's that. It's like a terrible sort of conjuring trick. I've been here, year after year, going on in the same old way, but almost every time I've seen you, you've been something quite different, nursery, prep school, public school, Oxford."

"Yes, I suppose so. But I assure you I've stopped now," he said, a trifle loftily.

"No, I'm sure you haven't. You'll be getting married or growing a moustache——"

"Heaven forbid!" Hilary shrieked. "This comes of living in the country, my dear. It's a morbid life. Look at all this rural fiction."

She looked at him instead. He was now a slim and elegant young man, with a clear-cut and vaguely impertinent profile. Probably he had the most outrageous opinions about everything. His father and her brother, the Indian Judge, who had not seen him for years, would have a surprise when he did see him. The thought gave her pleasure, for it seemed to her that the Judge had never had his share of unpleasant surprises. "Let me see," she murmured, "you're being called to the Bar, aren't you?"

"I'm supposed to be," he told her. "That's father's idea, and I'm eating dinners and that sort of thing. But I don't intend to go on with it. Very few fellows do, you know. Most of these barristers-in-embryo, who spend all their time when they're up preparing little speeches for

the Union, end as sporting journalists or music-hall agents or something of that sort."

For the next quarter of an hour, she listened to him proving that he was entirely unfitted for the Bar, a contemptible profession to a man of real intellect, and, remembering her somewhat pompous and overbearing brother, she listened with a certain malicious pleasure. When the Bar had been finally demolished, she asked him what his own plans were.

"Well, you've heard, of course, of *The Oxford Static?*" he began.

"No, I haven't. What is it?" And then, noticing his look of pained surprise, she went on: "I'm sorry. But we never hear about anything down here."

He brightened. "No, of course not. You're out of touch, and then Grandfather and everything. *The Oxford Static* was a review we ran. Three of us, Carrera-Brown—most brilliant man up, wonderful brain—and Sturge—he's a poet, you know—and me. It had a tremendous influence, simply tremendous. After a time, all the people who counted up there daren't *move* without it, simply daren't *move*."

"What was it all about?"

"A review of all the arts, yes, all the arts, even dancing and films. We had a new point of view, you see." He was so excited now that he rose from his chair and began pacing the room, and his voice got higher and higher. "We Statics—that's what we call ourselves—awfully good name, isn't it?—believe that Art has got to be beyond emotion. Life and Art have got absolutely choked up with filthy emotion, and we say the time has come for them to be—what shall I say?—feelingless, all calm and clear. Get rid of the feelings, first, we say. We saw the whole thing about two years ago, one night when we were talking in Carrera-Brown's rooms, and we talked and talked until we had settled it. What a night that was!"

"It must have been," his aunt murmured.

He paced up and down the room, waving his cigarette. "Then we found the name, and very soon we brought out this review. Now we're thinking of transferring the thing to town, calling it simply *The Static*. A monthly, we think. Lots of important people are interested—Carrera-Brown knows everybody, simply everybody, and Lady Bullard has

promised to help—and now we're each trying to raise some money to begin. I shall do the Drama and Films and French Literature. Cynthia Grumm, you know, who lives in Paris and has abolished the sentence altogether and makes new words all the time, has promised to write for us. But we've decided that there shan't be any names of contributors in the review, just numbers. I'm to be Static Three. That's a magnificent idea, isn't it? And Oppelworth is going to do some drawings for us, and be Static Six. We soon made a convert of him. He'd been going in for non-representational art—you know, no representation of natural objects but just drawings suggesting the artist's emotions, but now he sees that this won't do and so he's cutting out the emotions and becoming a Static. We're even having music, too. Pure form, you know."

"I'm not sure that I do know, Hilary," said Miss Trant, who had enjoyed herself but was beginning to feel very sleepy.

"Well, of course, I simply haven't begun to explain," he said excitedly. Then he caught sight of her stifling a yawn, and being a well-mannered youth, instantly checked his ardour: "But look here, you must be awfully tired. I suppose you go to bed about nine, don't you, as a rule? Don't let me keep you up. We'll talk about all that in the morning. Are there any books I can read?"

"I shouldn't think so. There are books, but I don't suppose you can read them."

"Well, I have one or two with me, and I'll scout about, if I may. I shan't be able to sleep for hours yet, hours and hours. And now that I've begun to talk about *The Static,* I feel more wakeful than ever."

"I can see that it excites you," said his aunt gravely.

"Yes, doesn't it?" replied the youth innocently. "I'm tremendously excited about the whole thing. Wouldn't you be? Think of the possibilities and—oh, everything!"

She left him to make himself calm and clear as best he could, and went to bed feeling more cheerful than she had done all day. The fact that any month now *The Static* might arrive to revolutionise the æsthetic doctrines of the world, the fact that she knew nothing whatever about Cynthia Grumm or Oppelworth, to say nothing of Carrera-

Brown and Sturge,—such matters did not keep her from sleep five minutes. An aunt has her compensations.

III

There was only one letter by Miss Trant's plate the following morning, but it was a very important letter indeed. It ran as follows:

My dear Elizabeth,

Did you know that your father owed me £600? He did, and he gave instructions to Truby that it should be repaid out of his estate. But when Truby settled the debt, he also explained who would be losing the money. If it had been either your brother or sister—who are both well off, or were when I last heard of them—I should have taken it like a shot, but I have no intention of taking it from you, and so have returned the £600 to Truby. Now don't be silly about this. I have as much as I want, and I know what your position is. I feel sure you are sensible enough not to refuse the money. What are you going to do? Twenty years ago, or even ten, I should have advised you to come out here, but the East isn't what it was, ruined by those damned silly student politics. If you can guarantee me something that remotely resembles a summer, I'll pay you a visit, but not before, for the last time I did nothing but shiver and wrap up.

Your affectionate uncle,

George Chatsworth.

She had read this once, in a rather dazed fashion, and was beginning again, when Hilary arrived, looking rather more Static than he had done the night before.

"That's my great-uncle, is it, the tea-planter man?" he said, after she had told him the news. "I saw him once, when I was still at school. He looked like Mark Twain. You'll take the money, of course?"

"I think so," said Miss Trant, rather slowly and dubiously.

"Why shouldn't you?" Hilary stared. "As a matter of fact, it's yours, and anyhow you've jolly well earned it. You haven't much money, have you?"

"No, I shall probably have about three hundred a year when I've let the Hall. By the way, some people are coming to look at it today. And I've about a thousand pounds over, from the Sale."

"Then you'll have a spare sixteen hundred roughly, with this windfall." Hilary delicately chipped at his egg, then looked across at her with raised eyebrows. "I suppose you wouldn't like to put some money into *The Static,* would you?"

"I don't think I would, Hilary," she replied briskly.

"No," he said, rather gloomily. "I thought you wouldn't. It's a pity, though, because you'd enjoy the thing so much—I mean really being *in it*—and of course you would probably make something out of it. You didn't mind my asking, did you?"

"Not at all." She smiled at him, and decided at once not to tell him the real reason why she had refused, which was that she was not going to encourage him to waste his time. "You see, there may be a family row if you go on with this business——"

"Sure to be," he put in calmly. "I haven't written to India yet, but I told Aunt Hilda the other day and she was frightfully down on it. But then she *would* be, you know. She's not like you. Her life's one long orgy of emotionalism, don't you think?"

"And you see," Miss Trant continued, after an amused glance of the mind at her sister Hilda confronted by the Statics, "I don't want to be mixed up in it, and I should be at once if I helped you."

"Couldn't you put the money in anonymously?"

"It would soon come out, I mean my part in it. You know how things do get about." She herself did not know at all how such things got about, but it sounded convincing.

"Rather," said Hilary, who knew even less. They looked at one another knowingly, and enjoyed themselves.

"I've got about a hundred that I can spare," he said, after he had lit the first cigarette. "But I want about two hundred and fifty. I think I shall sell that two-seater of mine. It's useless in town, anyhow. Only eats its head off. Do you know anybody here who wants a two-seater? It's a Mercia, last year's."

"No, I don't think I do," she said slowly, staring at him.

"What's the matter?"

She laughed. "Nothing. Shall we go out?" But she was still thinking about that two-seater.

He strolled over to the window. "What shall we do?"

"Anything you like. You're not interested in gardens, are you?"

"Not in the least," he replied heartily. "I don't mind sitting in them on warm afternoons, but I simply can't dig them up or talk about them or anything of that kind. We might run round in the car."

"I should like that. But stop, we can't go until I've shown those people the Hall. They're coming sometime today to look at it, and I promised to be here."

"I think I shall stroll up there myself. I'll have a look at the car, and then if those people come, I shall have a look at them too. I've never seen anybody examine a house."

"Why, do you want to?" asked Miss Trant, with raised eyebrows.

"I want to see people doing all kinds of things," he replied very gravely. "I'm an observer. I want to see but not to feel. That's my duty now, to watch and record. There's rhythm in all these activities and I want to be able to—to detach it. Think of the new films." After making these enigmatic observations, Static Three looked at her very solemnly, then, with a gesture of farewell, sauntered out of the room.

Miss Trant reached the bottom of the garden in time to see Hurley's ancient and gigantic Daimler, the vehicle for all entrances and exits in Hitherton, come slowly down the lane. Mrs. Chillingford was inside, on her way to the station, and she waved as she passed. As the car disappeared, Hitherton and the bright morning seemed to shrink. Mrs. Chillingford was on her way to Paddington, to Dorothy, to the embattled Atkinsons, to adventures with the Army and Navy Stores and the shipping offices. "What are *you* going to *do,* to *do,* to *do?"* the car seemed to roar back at her as it gathered speed down the hill. And she had no answer ready. She thought of the windfall of the morning, six hundred pounds out of the blue, and felt a little quiver of excitement. You could do all manner of things with six hundred pounds, perhaps go all round the world. But she did not want to go all round the world by herself. "I don't know what I want, that's the trouble," she told the great staring nodding dahlias. She found, however, that Mrs. Purton knew what she wanted, namely, some orders for lunch and dinner, and after consulting with her, Miss Trant went out to shop.

On her way back, she met Purton standing at the entrance to the Hall. "I was looking for you, Miss," he said, touching his cap, and

then instantly ramming his hands in his pockets. "They've just come, with a young feller from Medworth's. Look like these 'ere profiteers. Come in a car as big as a cottage."

She had no time to reply because at this moment the young fellow from Medworth's himself suddenly appeared round the corner, raised his hat, and began, in a dramatic whisper, "We're trying for two hundred."

He got no further, however, because now another man, very tall, very pale, and with a long drooping moustache, suddenly came round the corner, stared at everybody, took off his hat and forgot to replace it, and mumbled: "Miss Trant? Yes? Rathbury. Come to look. . . . Sorry to trouble. . . . Beautiful morning. . . ."

By this time the familiar entrance to the drive seemed to Miss Trant to have turned itself into a comic stage. She wanted to giggle at everything, but retained sufficient control over herself to tell Mr. Rathbury that she hoped he would like the house and that really it was rather charming.

"Just had a glance," Mr. Rathbury murmured. "Very delightful. Yes, certainly. Just what we're looking for. The very thing, I should think. Most charming."

"Of course, as you'll see, it's not very big," said Miss Trant brightly, feeling that she must say something.

"Not very big, no," the long moustache agreed. "No worse for that, though. Not at all. Not these days. Just the thing, I fancy."

"So you're here."

Everybody jumped. The voice was very loud and stern, and it came from a square woman, with a purplish fat face and two prominent staring grey eyes.

"My wife," Mr. Rathbury muttered, fading out.

"Oh, this is the owner, is it?" shouted Mrs. Rathbury, staring away. "Miss Trant, isn't it? How d'you do?"

"Do you want me to show you round?" Miss Trant felt as if she were addressing a battleship.

"Quite unnecessary, I think, quite unnecessary. We'll just look round ourselves for a few minutes. I don't expect we shall take the house.

It's very small, isn't it? We think it will be too small, don't we?" She switched the stare on to her husband for a second.

"Yes, of course, rather small, certainly," he mumbled, carefully looking at nobody. "Drawback of course, being small."

"And then it's not really the type of house we're looking for, not the style, as my husband has probably told you already."

"No, not the style." Mournfully he fingered the long moustache. "Not quite, certainly. Perhaps hardly at all."

"Not at all," Mrs. Rathbury shouted, giving them every one in turn a stare. "However, we might as well see it." Immediately she wheeled about and marched off, and her husband and the young estate agent hurried after her.

Miss Trant and Purton each drew a long breath, and looked at one another. "You'll be wantin' them thar pars down at the Cottage, Miss," said Purton very slowly. "I'll go and get 'em."

Miss Trant returned to the Cottage with her purchases, talked to Mrs. Purton, dusted the drawing-room, then walked back, slowly, very slowly, to the Hall. As she sauntered up the drive, she thought she saw Hilary disappearing into the garden at the back of the house. A moment later the Rathburys emerged from the front door.

"Yes, we'll take it. But not a penny more than two hundred," Mrs. Rathbury was shouting to the agent. Then she saw Miss Trant. "I'm just saying that we shall take it at two hundred. It's quite charming, quite charming, the sort of place that wants proper looking after. Several things to be done, of course." She stared at Miss Trant, then through her, it seemed, at all the other Trants, as if to accuse them all of neglecting the place. "We were fortunate in finding that young architect there to make suggestions."

Mr. Rathbury's moustache made some vague sound that implied it was in entire agreement with her.

It was now Miss Trant's turn to stare. She caught the eye of Mr. Medworth's assistant, who looked both triumphant and puzzled. Turning to Mrs. Rathbury again, she saw with astonishment that that lady was actually smiling at her. True, the eyes had no part in the smile, but the rest of her face was amiably creasing.

"You never told us it was such a show place," Mrs. Rathbury shouted

in great good-humour. "I saw at once, of course, that it must be, and could be more of one, properly cared for. It was the young architect who told us all about it. Did he tell you he had come a hundred miles to see it?"

"I don't know," Miss Trant stammered. "I don't quite understand. Who is this?"

"What was the name?" Mrs. Rathbury stared all about her as if the name must be written up somewhere. "Oh yes, of course—Mr. Static."

There was no help for it. Miss Trant gave a little shriek of laughter. "I'm sorry," she gurgled. "It's—it's such a silly name, isn't it?"

"Yes, rather; it is, certainly," Mr. Rathbury mumbled, evidently under the impression that he had been appealed to.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Rathbury looked from one to the other in obvious disapproval. "It's a name of some importance, I understand, in—in architectural circles. What was it Mr. Static said he was an authority on?"

"Seventeenth-century panelled interiors," replied the young estate agent, in what seemed to Miss Trant a rather queer tone of voice.

"Exactly! I ought to have remembered, because I knew the name well. Seventeenth-century panelled interiors. This is a very good specimen, he said. But of course they want proper attention. A house of this kind is a responsibility, of course. Perhaps you're not interested in these things, Miss Trant. Tell Johnson we're ready to go back now."

Miss Trant was fighting an impulse to tell her that she could not have the house after all. With this woman settled in the Hall, Hitherton would be impossible, even though it meant that Mrs. Chillingford could begin a new saga. "It's strange," she told herself, "that I don't care more than I do. Perhaps it shows that I really am tired of living here." And she answered Mrs. Rathbury's questions meekly enough, said nothing about Hilary (which served her right), then referred her to Mr. Medworth.

After lunch, during which Hilary was divided between the glee of the mischievous small boy and the natural shame of a solemn young intellect who has indulged his lower self, they drove to Cheltenham in Hilary's car. There she saw Mr. Truby, who congratulated her on the result of the Sale, the gift of six hundred pounds, and the letting

of the house, then told her that she ought to go away and enjoy herself. "You're comfortably off now," he added. "Much better than we expected. I'll keep this sixteen hundred pounds in a deposit account for you until you decide what to do with it. Don't worry about money. What you want now is a change," he concluded, with the air of a man who knew what a change was, even though he had never had one.

Miss Trant walked out of the dim office into the bright sunshine, feeling vaguely exhilarated. "How queer and old-fashioned solicitors' offices are!" she cried to Hilary. "Going to see Mr. Truby is like walking into a Dickens novel."

"How ghastly for you!" The Static shuddered. Then, as they found a tea shop, he observed mournfully: "When you were in there, I took the car round to a garage to see what sort of price I should get for it. About seventy-five pounds, they said. That's about half of what it's worth. Isn't it a swindle? These garage people hate to pay cash for a car. They'll allow you anything nearly if they are selling you another." And having thus descended to this ordinary low level of thought and feeling, he remained there throughout tea and his aunt smiled upon him.

About halfway home, on a quiet stretch of road, she asked him to pull up. "Do you think I might try to drive now?" she asked rather breathlessly. "I have a licence because I've tried before, when Dorothy Chillingford had a car. Will you explain about this one?"

"Nothing in it. The thing practically drives itself. Why do you want to bother, though?" He jumped out and walked round the car.

"Because—if I can drive it, I'll buy it from you, Hilary; that is, if you really want to sell it."

"You will!" cried the Static joyfully. "Of course I want to sell it."

"And I'll give you what you say it's worth, a hundred and fifty pounds."

"Oh! I say! Will you really? But are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure," she said, firmly. "That is, so long as I can drive it."

"Of course you can drive it," he cried, with mounting enthusiasm. "Nothing easier! Let me show you where everything is. It really is a good little car, you know."

And he did show her where everything was, and for the next hour

she sat at the wheel under his tuition. So rapidly did she gain confidence that at last she drove them both home, passing two very large buses, a steam-wagon, and several jumpy rattling lorries, without slowing down to less than fifteen miles an hour, and finally sailing up the Hall drive, flushed and triumphant. Then followed ten minutes further instruction on getting it in and out of the garage (which was not a proper garage at all but an old stable), and Miss Trant discovered once again the terrors and dangers of reversing, but was assured by Hilary that all was well with her.

"I'll give you a cheque in the morning," she told him, as they sat at dinner.

"No hurry at all, you know," he explained, though his face had brightened. "Still, it would be rather useful. If we spent all tomorrow morning with the car—though you don't really need any more instruction from me, I can tell you—I could catch the afternoon train up to town. I hope you don't mind my running away at once, but the fact is, I must get hold of Carrera-Brown as soon as I can."

"I don't mind," she told him. "I shall probably go away myself very soon, perhaps the day after tomorrow." She was rather astonished when she heard herself announcing this departure. It was, so to speak, as much news to her as it was to him. Indeed, she was the more surprised of the two.

"Splendid!" he said, in an abstracted fashion, looking through her. She could see he was already busy meeting the other Statics.

That night she finished *Redgauntlet* yet once more, but this time she put it down without the smallest sigh. The dark mysterious hours found her guiding a little blue Mercia down roads that nobody knew, roads that wound through the shining hills of a dream.

IV

"Do you know——" Hilary began, looking down upon her from the carriage window.

"Well! Do I know what?" She smiled up at him.

That pitiless observer of the human race hesitated a moment. Then he continued: "There's something different about you today. It must be the car."

"Perhaps it is," she assented. "I'm beginning to feel reckless, Hilary. Do you know what number I shall be among the Statics?"

The train began to move.

"Not less than the fifty-second millionth!" she called, and waved him good-bye.

On the way home she pulled up beside a black figure plodding up the dusty hill.

"What's this? What's this?" cried Mr. Chillingford.

"Come in and see," she told him, and before they had climbed the hill he had accepted an invitation to tea and learned all about the car.

"I feel like going away in it at once," she confided, over their first cups.

Mr. Chillingford lowered his spectacles and raised his eyebrows. "By yourself?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. No, of course. Why not?" He laughed and then they both laughed, and felt very friendly. Immediately afterwards, however, Mr. Chillingford fell into such a profound reverie that he crumbled walnut cake all over his clothes.

"Well?" she asked, at length.

"I'm sorry. Dear me, what a mess I've made! I was thinking you ought to begin with Ely. Just think of it! You would go down from these hills into the Midland plain, getting lower and lower the further east you went, until at last you would find yourself—as it were—at the bottom of the basin. Then you would see that colossal tower shooting up—a sublime spectacle, my dear Elizabeth. You've not seen Ely, of course? No, I thought not. That miraculous octagon! There's a kind of barbaric splendour about the whole place! You must begin with Ely." He was so excited now that he deposited his cup and saucer on the plate of sandwiches.

Miss Trant, who had been staring at him in amazement, suddenly remembered, and cried: "Of course! You're talking about a tour of the cathedrals."

"Indeed I am. Wasn't that the idea? Of course it wasn't, though. How absurd of me! That was my idea, wasn't it? I said something

about it the other day. I thought that was what you were going to do. What an old egoist I'm becoming! I was thinking you might call on my old friend Canon Fothergill at Lincoln. That is, if you began at Ely. And, mind you, that's the place to begin at. But then, of course, you are not beginning anywhere, so to speak. Just my foolishness!" And he laughed a little.

"Yes, I am," said Miss Trant stoutly. "I'm beginning at Ely, just as you suggest. And I *will* call on Canon Fothergill at Lincoln, if he'll let me. And you *shall* tell me where to go."

Mr. Chillingford scrambled to his feet, spreading walnut cake in all directions. "I'll slip over to the rectory for my old map. It will be as good as a holiday to take a look at it again. I've done all this, every inch, in my time, on a pushbike, you know."

But Miss Trant brought out a map and for the next quarter of an hour their two heads were bent over it. Mr. Chillingford showered roads, towns, inns, naves, transepts, upon her, and in his excitement upset the milk jug. He brought out pencil and paper, covered two sheets with directions, crammed them into his pocket, then searched the room and declared they were lost. Miss Trant wanted to rush upstairs at once and hurl all her things into bags. "I'll start tomorrow morning," she announced.

"I shouldn't," he warned her. "It's Sunday tomorrow. Don't mistake me. I'm no Sabbatarian. Besides, there's more worship in going to look at Ely than in listening to me. But Sunday's a bad day to begin a journey. Wait a day. Start on Monday. There never was a Monday morning yet when I didn't want to be going somewhere."

And it was on Monday morning that she did set out, after a tremendous Sunday of packing and instructions to the Purtons and letters to all manner of people. She had a last five minutes' talk with Mr. Chillingford, turned perilously to wave to him nearly at the corner, and then went rolling down the hill, eastward out of Hitherton. The valley lay all golden in the deep sunshine; the morning was as crisp as a nut; the roads scrawled invitations, the very wires above hummed faint calls, to the misty blue beyond; and every turn of the wheel brought her a sense of mastery, and every milestone passed, bringing

nearer the unknown and the gloriously irresponsible, gave her a new little thrill. Was she going across country to Ely? She was going anywhere, anywhere, wherever she pleased. This was the road to the first of the cathedrals, but it was also the road to—what? She didn't know, and delightedly she hugged her ignorance, vague and shining, a mist brightening with golden shapes, just like the morning itself.

In her bag were thirty pounds and a cheque book that would call at once on fifteen hundred more. And, snugly tucked away behind were all the nicest things she had, a dressing case she had only used once before, and four glorious historical novels, crowds of archers, Jacobites, conspirators, dragoons, crying to be let loose at the first hour of lamplight. They were all running away from Hitherton, into the adventurous blue, together.

In a tangle of traffic at narrow Northleach she had to pull up beside a huge car that had come from the opposite direction. From this car a familiar long drooping moustache cautiously emerged.

"Miss Trant, isn't it? Thought it was," it mumbled at her. "Lovely morning. Not going far, eh?"

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Rathbury," she called out, loudly and clearly. "Yes, it's absolutely wonderful, isn't it? And I *am* going far, hundreds and hundreds of miles until I am lost." And she smiled, and did not stop smiling when she found herself confronted by a purple square of face and a grey stare.

"I beg your pardon," shouted Mrs. Rathbury, now purpler than ever from bending so far forward. "Where did you say you were going? We were coming over to look at the Hall again. We may want to see you."

"I'm going to be invisible." Yes, she actually heard herself saying it. And then she turned her attention to the clutch and gears, for everybody was moving again.

"What address?" came the scream, now from behind.

"No address. No-o a-a-dre-esss." She shouted it at the top of her voice. Not for years had she made such a noise. It was splendid.

Now the road emptied itself and broadened before her. A wind from the southwest caught up to her and coloured her cheeks. (It went

on and on until at last it found the smoke from Higden's mill, where Mr. Oakroyd was spending his very last day.) She shot forward and upward, then skimmed along one of England's little green roofs, this Miss Trant that nobody at Hitherton had ever seen and perhaps would never see.

Chapter Three

INIGO JOLLIFANT QUOTES SHAKESPEARE AND DEPARTS IN THE NIGHT

I

We have left all the hills behind; our faces are turned towards the long strands, salted and whistling, of the North Sea. Here, the land is a great saucer, patterned with dykes and arrowy roads. To the north and to the south are smudges of smoke, the bright webbing of railway lines, towers that are older than the distant fields they chime to, Peterborough, Ely, Cambridge. We are on the edge of the Fens. It is a place plucked from the water. Only here and there remains the old darkly gleaming chaos of marsh and reeds, alders and bulrushes, the sudden whirr and scream of wildfowl. All else is now deep pasturage and immense fields bright with stubble, feeding the windmills and the scattered red-brick farms. It is a country to make a farmer fat; these are fields to put beef and pudding and ale on a man's table. Yet it seems to be still haunted by its old desolation. Perhaps the sky, which can show a spread of cloud and blue by day, a glitter of stars by night, not to be matched elsewhere between Berwick and Penzance, is too big, too masterful, for a man's peace of mind, unless, like so many in the old days, he comes here simply to worship God. Perhaps too much is heard of its bitter neighbour, the North Sea, and of winds that come from the Steppes. Perhaps it is only because it is a hollow land, which every darkness turns again into a place of spectral marshes and monkish ghosts. Something desolating certainly remains, a whisper not to be drowned by the creaking of the heaviest harvest-wagons. The little farms seem lonelier than lighthouses. The roads go on and on, one ruled mile after another, but would never appear to arrive anywhere. The very trains, cautiously puffing along a raised single track,

seem to be without either starting-places or destinations, and so wander undramatically across the landscape, only heightening, by their passing, the long silences. The vague sadness of a prairie has fallen upon this plain of dried marshes. Like a rich man who gives but never smiles, this land yields bountifully but is at heart still a wilderness.

Somewhere in the middle of this region, a narrow side-road finds its way to a hamlet, made up of about twenty houses, a tiny shop and an ale-house, and then wanders on another mile or so in order to arrive at a house of some size, where it stops, despairingly. This is easily the largest house in the neighbourhood, a red-brick building in no recognisable style of architecture, and perhaps sixty or seventy years old. It was built by a strange gentleman from Australia, who had for years dreamed of a country mansion, and, once he was installed in it, proceeded very quietly to drink himself to death. Now, as certain sheds and newer outhouses, goal-posts and worn fields testify, it is no longer a country mansion. It is some years since James Tarvin, M.A. (Cantab.) married a woman ten years older than himself, bought with her money the desirable property known as Washbury Manor, and transformed it into Washbury Manor School, in which some fifty or sixty boys, preferably the sons of gentlemen, are prepared for the public schools and whatever else may befall them in this life. Letters from all over the world arrive now at Washbury Manor. Men and women in far-distant bungalows receive little scrawls from there and are very proud and boring about them. Quite a number of the small boys at Washbury have parents who are in India and Africa and such places, and not a few of the rest have no parents at all but merely guardians, persons who are conscientious enough but cannot be expected to discover the relative merits of all the preparatory schools in England. Not that Washbury Manor is a bad school; but, on the other hand, it is certainly not one of the best. One visiting uncle, a master in the merchant service, put it to himself and to anybody who might be listening: "It don't smell right." But he himself was not the kind of person that Mr. Tarvin—it is his own phrase—wished to have associated with the school. Mr. Tarvin could afford to be contemptuous of such criticism. He had references from public men, including a Colonial Bishop; some scholarships to the school's credit; pure air and water, a bracing atmos-

phere, perfect sanitation, good playing fields; and a teaching staff of three university graduates, Robert Fauntley, M.A. (Oxon.), Inigo Jollifant, B.A. (Cantab.), Harold Felton, B.A. (Bristol); a matron, Miss Callander, with a diploma in the domestic sciences; and an ex-regular non-commissioned officer, Sergeant Comrie, to take drill and carpentering. Moreover, the health and comfort of the boys are the care of no less a person than Mrs. Tarvin herself, the daughter of the Rev. George Betterby. If you are a parent in India, is it not worth cutting things down a little, depriving yourself of a few holidays in the hills, we will say, merely to know that your boy is in such hands as these? Term by term, Mr. Tarvin received tribute from the very frontiers of our Empire, and rarely had he to complain that one of his little iron bedsteads was without its weight of boy.

They are all in bed now, these boys, but they are not all asleep. Mr. Felton has already looked in once at the older ones, who may be subject to the vaguely disturbing influences of Saturday night, and has told them to be quiet. All the other adult persons in the house are trying to forget the existence of boys. Mrs. Tarvin has commanded the presence of Miss Callander in her drawing-room and is pleasantly occupied in bullying her. Mr. Tarvin himself, having been told to keep out of the way for half an hour after dinner, has retired to what he calls his study, and there, pasty, damp, and breathing heavily, he has cast off both the schoolmaster and the anxious husband and has turned himself into a dozing middle-aged sedentary man, with a weak stomach lulled for a little while into a false peace. Mr. Fauntley has disappeared on one of his mysterious Saturday night excursions. Sergeant Comrie is walking over the fields to the village inn, where he is regarded as a rich cosmopolitan character. Mr. Jollifant is in his bed-sitting-room, a very small and stuffy apartment not far from the roof, which he prefers to the equally small and stuffy common room because at this moment he is engaged in what he imagines to be literary composition.

He is sitting in a Windsor chair that he has tilted back to a very perilous angle, and his feet, enclosed in vivid green carpet slippers, are resting on the sill of the open window. There is about both his attitude and his apparel that elaborate carelessness of the undergraduate, though Inigo Jollifant, now in his twenty-sixth year, left Cambridge three years

ago. He is a thin loose-limbed youth, a trifle above medium height. His face does not suggest the successful preparatory-school master. It seems rather too fantastic. A long lock of hair falls perpetually across his right eyebrow; his nose itself is long, wandering and whimsical, and his grey eyes are set unusually wide apart and have in them a curious gleam. He wears a blue pullover, no coat, a generous bow-tie, and baggy and rather discoloured flannel trousers. He is smoking a ridiculously long cherry-wood pipe. There is about him the air of one who is ready to fail gloriously at almost anything. We realise at once that his History, French, English Literature, his cricket and football, are dashing but sketchy. At this moment he is ostensibly engaged in writing an elaborate essay—in a manner of the early Stevenson—entitled *The Last Knapsack,* an essay that he began many weeks ago, in the middle of the long vacation. His right hand grasps a fountain pen and there is a writing-block on his knees, but never a word does he set down. He blows out clouds of smoke, keeps his feet on the window-sill, and balances his chair at a still more alarming angle.

There is a knock at the door, and then a face looks in, bringing with it a flash of eye-glasses.

"Hello! Who's that?" he cries, without turning round. "Come in."

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Jollifant." And the visitor enters.

"Oh, it's you, Felton, is it?" Inigo twists his head round, and grins. "Come in and sit down."

Felton is about the same age, but after that there is no further likeness. He is a pleasant, earnest young man, whose rimless eye-glasses give him a rather misleading look of energy and alertness. Two years ago, he left the University of Bristol, at which he had spent four undistinguishable years, with the determination to do his duty, speak the truth, and be friendly with everybody; and a certain sense of anxiety discovered in his face, voice, manner, suggests that he has not found it easy. Already he is beginning to approach life, or at least every succeeding new manifestation of it, with a slightly halting step and a little prefatory cough. He goes warily through the term, occasionally reading large dull biographies and smoking non-nicotine cigarettes and always agreeing with everybody, and then tries to forget his responsibilities in cautious foreign travel.

He sat down, then cleared his throat. "Look here, Jollifant, I'm sorry to trouble you."

"Felton, you do not trouble me," said Inigo, regarding his companion as if he were a fairly intelligent fox terrier. "It's true I was in the throes of composition. Throes! What damned silly words we use! Have you ever been in throes?"

"Yes, I see you were," replied Felton, looking with something like reverence at the writing-block. He had a deep veneration for literature, so deep that he hardly ever made acquaintance with it. He did not know whether these things that Jollifant was always trying to write were literature or not, but as usual he was not taking any risks. "It's about the washing lists," he added apologetically.

"The washing lists!" the other cried, in an ecstasy of scorn. "This is Saturday night, Felton. Think of that, Saturday night! Remember your orgies at Bristol. Now I'm prepared, as you see, to devote myself in stern seclusion, to Art, searching for the exact phrase. Don't forget that—the exact phrase. Takes a devil of a lot of finding. Again"—and he looked very severely at his visitor and took out the cherry-wood pipe—"I'm prepared to come down from yonder height, as it were, to make merry with you, to exchange ideas, to hear you talk of the old wild days at Bristol. But no washing lists! Not on Saturday night!"

"I see what you mean," said Felton. "It's an awful nuisance, of course. But still, Mrs. Tarvin said——"

Inigo held up his hand. "Her words fall on deaf ears. That woman's a gorgon. Tonight, I refuse to believe she exists."

"Well, we told you what she was like," said the other. This was his fourth term at the school, and it was Inigo's third. Mrs. Tarvin had been away, for a long rest-cure, during both the previous terms, so that Felton had known her for about eleven weeks, whereas Inigo had only known her for one. "We told you what it would be like when she came back," he added, with all the irritating complacency of the successful prophet.

"What you told me was a mere nothing," Inigo cried. "You said, for instance, that the food would be cut down a bit when she came back. It's not been cut down, it's been cut out, clean out. There's

nothing left but the smell, which is worse than ever. Look at tonight's mess!"

"I know. Pretty bad, wasn't it?"

"Shepherds' pie—and no shepherd would ever touch it—for the second time this week, and prunes for the third or fourth! And she calls that a dinner—on Saturday night, too! And there she sits, the shapeless old guzzler, choking herself right under our noses with cutlets and cream and God knows what. That's the last refinement of torture. If she was in the trough with us, groping amongst the minced stuff and prunes and muck, it wouldn't be so bad. But to sit there, letting us see that real food still exists, letting us watch it being converted into that fat of hers, it's simply piling on the insult, it's devilish! If there's another dinner like that, I shall take sandwiches and chocolate down and eat them in front of her. It isn't that I care so much about food. My soul, Felton, is like a star and dwells apart, absolutely. But I ask you! Can you worthily instruct the young, can you wrestle with the problems of French and History, day after day, on prunes? It can't be done."

"No. I see what you mean, of course. Though, as a matter of fact," he added hesitantly, "I rather like prunes."

"Under which king, Besonian? Speak or die!" Inigo shouted, pointing his pipe-stem at the startled Felton. "He that is not with us is against us. Do you ask for prunes, Felton? Do you creep down to that wretched female Tarvin, with your tongue lolling out, and say, 'More prunes. Custard or no custard, more prunes'?"

"Don't be an ass, Jollifant," Felton wriggled. "Besides, I hate shepherds' pie as much as you do. It'll be like that all the term. I told you what it would be."

"The whole subject," the other began loftily, "is profoundly distasteful to me. Let me read you a sentence or two from *The Last Knapsack,* an essay celebrating—mournfully, you understand—the final extinction of the walking tour. Have you an ear for a phrase, Felton?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think so. But, look here—I'd like to slip up later and hear that—but what about those washing lists?"

Before Inigo could express his opinion again on the subject, there came a little knock at the door. It was Miss Callander, and she looked

as if she had just retreated to her room in a shower of tears and had hastily quitted it in a cloud of powder. She was a distant connexion of Mr. Tarvin's, a tall, rather plump girl of twenty-seven, who would not have been noticeable in the nearest town but who seemed in this wilderness almost a beauty, and was certainly too well-favoured to be successful as the school matron, especially since she had been appointed by Mr. Tarvin during his wife's absence at the beginning of the year. She had only spent ten days so far trying to please Mrs. Tarvin, but already she was beginning to realise the hopelessness of the task. For the past four years, she had been engaged off and on to a cousin who was out in Egypt. During the last three months, the engagement had been off, but even now she was meditating a letter that would put it on again.

Inigo beamed upon her snub nose, round and rapidly doubling chin, and large and rather foolish eyes. They were, he told himself again, the eyes of a stricken deer. "This, Miss Callander," he announced gravely, "is an honour."

"Oh, Mr. Jollifant," she fluttered, "is Mr. Felton here? Oh, I see he is. Mr. Felton, it's about the washing lists——"

"Felton," said Inigo sternly, turning round, "what about those lists?"

"That's just what I was asking," Felton began, hastily coming forward.

Inigo cut him short with a superb gesture, then smiled at Miss Callander with deep tenderness and looked for a moment as if he were about to pat her hand. "You want them now, I take it?"

"I do, yes. As soon as possible. Mrs. Tarvin's perfectly furious about *everything*." And her eyes grew and grew and her mouth dropped.

"Say no more," cried Inigo, with an air of immense benevolence. "What man can do, we will do, at least if Felton will condescend to give me a little assistance." He rummaged amongst a mass of papers on his table, found what he wanted, then added: "Forward to the common room. And the motto is 'One for all, and all for one'—absolutely. Lead on, Miss Callander. Master Felton, take these papers, and shake off that deep lethargy." And off they went, with Miss Callander, giggling a little, in front.

By the time that Inigo had carefully filled and lighted his absurd

pipe and had smiled dreamily for a few moments through the haze of smoke at his two colleagues, they had completed the lists. "There now," he said, as Miss Callander gathered up the papers. "That's done with. What do we do now? I can't go back to that beastly little room of mine and try to write. The mood, Miss Callander, the precious mood, is shattered; the golden bowl, Felton, is broken. I shall try a little music."

Miss Callander, at the door, turned wide eyes upon him. "How can you, though? I mean, where will you go?"

"Aren't you forgetting," he replied with dignity, "that there is an instrument—I won't say a piano, but anyhow something in the semblance of a piano—in our rotten school-room?"

"Oh, but Mr. Jollifant!" she gave a tiny giggle that was a mixture of delight and apprehension. "Don't you remember Mrs. Tarvin said it wasn't to be used in the evening? She did, didn't she, Mr. Felton?"

"She did, you know, Jollifant," said Felton, with an earnest flash of his glasses. "It's a shame, of course, but that's what she said."

"My friends, my old companions in misfortune, I thank you for these words of warning, but I know nothing of such orders, tyrannical commands which—er—strike at the very roots of liberty. Is thy servant a dog that he shall not do this thing? The answer is, 'No, decidedly not!' I go to play—as best I can, and by George, that's not saying much because half the keys stick all the time—I go to play, I repeat, upon the school-room piano. Open your ears—I mean yours, Miss Callander, because Felton's, as you can see, are open enough—and they shall drink in melody and harmony and what's its name—a spot or two of counterpoint." And Inigo marched downstairs to the dismal little school-room, once the drawing-room of Washbury Manor and now a cheerless huddle of desks and blackboards and yellowing maps. It was dusk now, and he switched on a naked and shivering electric light, then walked over to the far corner of the room and seated himself before one of those cottage pianos, with ochreous fronts and mournful blue-white keys, that are designed and glued and varnished for no other places but miserly institutions. The pedal creaked, the keys stuck together, the tone was sadly tinny, but it was a piano, and music could be wrung out of it.

It must be said at once that Inigo's playing, like his French and History and cricket, was dashing but sketchy. He was not of your cool and impeccable executants, delicately phrasing, to the last grace-note, their Bachs and Mozarts. His technique was faulty and his taste was worse. He himself thought little of his musical powers, and all his serious thought, his finer energies, were devoted to the composition of elaborate prose. In more expansive moments, he saw himself as another Pater or Stevenson. But he was not a writer, and never would be. Try as he might, he only succeeded in putting honest words on the rack, leaving them screaming, though of this he was happily unconscious. He was marked out to be one of those wistful adorers who never even catch a glance from the Muse. He would never create literature, though his life itself might be rich with its scents and flavours. He would always be one of its failures, though perhaps one of its happy failures, that company of humble aspirants—and at heart Inigo was humble enough—who discover more joy in the sight of a sadly botched manuscript than many a successful writer has found in a row of admired volumes. On the other hand, in his antics at the piano, which had made him so popular at school, at Cambridge, and at odd parties everywhere, those antics that he regarded with smiling contempt, there was really a glint of genius. His touch was light, crisp and somehow deliciously comic; he could start the keys into elfin life; and not only could he read easily at sight, and improve as he read, the common sort of music, the songs and dance tunes that were so often demanded of him, not only could he play by ear and throw in a trick or two of his own as he played, but he was able to improvise the most amusing little tunes, cynical-sentimental things of the moment, not unlike all the other butterfly melodies that wing their way across the world and then perish obscurely, and yet all his own, with a twist in them, something half wistful, half comic, in their lilt, that belonged to nobody else. He would play these things until every foot was tap-tapping, and many a listener vainly attempting to catch again the deft little phrases, would be maddened for weeks. But he would only try variations of key and manner until at last his ear was satisfied. He never tried to put them down on paper. It had not occurred to him that the world was being scoured for such tunes; and if it had occurred to

him, he would probably have remained indifferent, having a *Last Knapsack* still to finish.

For several days an unusually impudent and delicious little tune had been capering at the back of his mind, and now, after some preliminary flourishes, he set out to capture it. He fumbled about for a few minutes in the key of D major, but then slid into his favourite E flat. The next moment the poor hulk of a piano leaped into life. The tune was his, and he began toying ecstatically with it. Now it ran whispering in the high treble; now it crooned and gurgled in the bass; and then, off it went scampering, with a flash of red heels and a tossing of brown curls. There was no holding it at all. It pirouetted round the room, mocking the desks and blackboards and maps: the air was full of its bright mischief. *Rumty-dee-tidee-dee, Rumty-dee-tidee.* But why try to describe that little tune or make any mystery of it? All the world knows it now, or did yesterday, as *Slippin' round the Corner.* What Inigo played that night was not quite the final melody that became so famous as a song and a dance tune afterwards: the butterfly was hardly out of the chrysalis yet; but, on the other hand, the lilt that came out then had not been blared and bleated and howled and vulgarised in every conceivable fashion, and still had all its enchanting mockery of things heavy and dull and lifeless. Inigo twisted it this way and that, sent little glittering showers of high notes over the melody, let it sink down in mock despair to the bass, then made it ring so triumphantly through the school-room that it shattered the place altogether and set up in its stead a room that was all long windows and gardens beyond and youth and happy folly. As he did this, Inigo laughed aloud.

"Mr. Jollifant!" A voice at the door.

Rumty-dee-tidee-dee. This was the best tune yet. It was what Saturday night ought to be. It danced clean over Washbury Manor School at the very first note, cleared the long sullen fields, and then went capering through bright towns that could not be found on any map.

"Mr. Jollifant!" The voice was closer and louder, a screech.

Rumty-dee-tidee. And friends you had never seen before joined hands with you, and away you went, past lines of laughing girls. . . .

"Mr. Jollifant!"

And Inigo let his hands fall from the keys and awoke to make the discovery that Mrs. Tarvin really existed and was standing before him, very angry indeed. There followed a moment during which he was able to examine distastefully and in silence her shapeless black figure, her grey hair with its odd ribbon in front, her steel spectacles, her long sallow face that always contrasted so dramatically and repellantly with her bulk of body.

"Didn't you hear me calling?" she demanded furiously.

"I'm afraid I didn't." Inigo smiled at her in a dazed fashion. The tune was still running through his head.

"Well, please stop playing at once, at once," cried Mrs. Tarvin. She had a trick of repeating phrases, raising her voice the second time, that had been meat and drink to mimics at Washbury for years. "I thought it was clearly understood that this piano was not to be played at all, not at all, in the evening."

"But that's the only time I can play it, absolutely the only time," Inigo replied, quite unwittingly falling into mimicry there and then. "And, after all, I give some of the boys music lessons. Music's an extra and—er—we share the profits. And I can't give music lessons unless I play myself sometime, can I?" And he gave her a broad smile.

It was not returned. Mrs. Tarvin had known Inigo only a week, but already she had begun to regard him as another of her husband's unfortunate appointments. "The music lessons are not important, not important at all," she said coldly. "And in any case, I don't see that it is at all necessary that in order to give them, you must play music-hall tunes as loudly as you can when all the boys are in bed, yes, long ago in bed."

"The longer in bed, you know, the deeper the sleep," he began.

"That will do, please, Mr. Jollifant. The rule is that this piano shall not be played, not be played, in the evening." And she swept round as if she were on a swivel, drew herself up, and marched out.

Inigo followed, whistling softly the night's tune, which now was not only deliciously lilting but also had a certain rebellious note in it. At the head of the stairs, on the way to his room, he met Miss Callander, who looked as if she had been standing there, listening.

"Oh, I heard her go down. Did she stop you?"

"She did, she did," he replied. "And just when I was beginning to enjoy myself. Did you hear the thing I was playing? A poor thing, but mine own."

"Was it really? I thought it was lovely. You *are* clever." Then she dropped her voice. "I knew she'd stop you. She's been fearfully cross all the evening and blamed me for all kinds of silly things just after dinner, and I really don't know what to do." And she put a hand to her cheek and looked at him forlornly.

He took her hand and held it somewhat absent-mindedly. "She thinks by keeping us on a low diet—I mean shepherds' pie and prunes —to crush our spirit. But she won't succeed, unless perhaps with Felton, who hasn't much spirit anyhow, and likes prunes, or says he does. But you and I, Miss Callander——" and he completed the sentence by squeezing her hand.

She withdrew her hand, though not hastily. "She's really awful, isn't she? And only a week of term gone! And weeks and weeks yet! What will she be like at the end? Better, perhaps."

"Worse, decidedly worse," said Inigo impressively. "Nine weeks more of her—it's unthinkable. Believe me"—and now his voice sank to a fearsome whisper—"young as the term is, short as is the acquaintance of this gorgon-like female and myself, the fates have already conspired together and woven a web and laid a train, and very soon—do you know what will happen here very soon, do you know what there will be?"

Her round eyes and parted lips were sufficient to frame the question. But Inigo's sense of the dramatic compelled him to wait a few moments. His stare was heavy with doom.

"A bust-up," he said at length, "and a bust-up of the most astounding and shattering proportions." He gave her another fateful glance, then quite suddenly grinned at her, waved his hand, and went striding down the corridor, whistling his tune, that tune which is perhaps the *leit-motif* of the piece.

II

Sunday was surprisingly warm for a late September day. It was not, however, a pleasant and bright warmth, but sulky grey heat, as if the whole place had been shovelled into a huge dim oven. Not a breath

stirred the surrounding fields, and all the air inside the school seemed to have been used over and over again. Midday dinner with the boys had been a misery, and Inigo, who had hacked off innumerable slices of boiled beef, had had some greasy traffic with carrots, and had then watched fifteen boys eat tapioca pudding, felt hot, sick and cross.

"I was wrong about there being only two smells here," he announced angrily to Felton, with whom he left the dining-room. "There are two smells-in-chief, I admit. The smell of boy is the first, of course. And the smell from the kitchen, which must be piled high with decaying bones and drenched in cabbage water, is the second. These are what's its name—dominant. But—are you listening, Felton?"

"Not more than I can help, I must say," said Felton, without turning round. They were now going upstairs, and he was in front. "But go on, Jollifant, if it amuses you."

"Ah, Felton, even you feel the iron entering your soul. Where is that genial comradeship, that old West Country good nature? And let me tell you that it doesn't amuse me. But what I was going to say was that it's a mistake to imagine that there aren't other smells here, little old smells that live in corners, large vague smells that drift about the corridors, smells that——"

"Oh, do shut up!" Felton increased his pace. "I've just had dinner."

"And you want to wrestle with it in peace? You intend to turn it into an honest bit of Felton? These be mysteries, not to be tampered with or butted into by the profane."

"I'm wondering what to do," said Felton, standing at the door of his room.

"You're wondering what to do!" cried Inigo, patting him on the shoulder. "Then I say you're lucky. I've got past that. I know that it's a warm Sunday afternoon in a smelly school miles from anywhere and there's nothing to do."

"I think I shall go for a walk."

"What! the same old round—through the fields, Washbury, over the old bridge, back down the road. Oh no, Felton, you don't mean it."

"No, not that way. I thought of going along the dyke to Kinthorpe," said Felton, with the air of a modest hero. "You can get tea there, too." And he nodded brightly and went into his room.

By the time Inigo had stretched himself across his two chairs and had lit his pipe, he had an inspiration. He knew that Daisy Callander was free until early evening. Why shouldn't he take her to Kinthorpe or somewhere to tea? She was not perhaps an enthusiastic walker but she could manage that distance. There were times when he half fancied that he was in love with Daisy, though he never could shake off the knowledge that he had only to see half-a-dozen other girls to be quite sure he was not in love with her. He knew too that it was impossible to spend more than an hour alone with Daisy without flirting with her, because somehow there was nothing else left to do. But then he had no objection to flirting. He had no objection to anything, apart from work and from the baser and more violent crimes, that would pass the time. Languidly, he began to change some of his clothes, beginning with his collar.

There was a knock, and Felton looked in, all neat and shining. The very sight of his trim brown felt hat, his dreary blue tie, his flashing eye-glasses, gave Inigo an awful sense of dullness. A walk with Felton would be like a stroll across the Gobi Desert.

"You're not coming, Jollifant?"

Inigo gave him a long head-shake. "No, thanks. Some other time when I'm a stronger and saner man and the wild North-Easter does whatever what's his name—Mr. Kingsley—says it does. But not today."

"I thought not." Felton grinned, rather surprisingly, and withdrew.

"And that," Inigo told himself, "disposes of you, Master Felton. Now for the fair Daisy." And he pulled what seemed to him a fine melodramatic face and even went over to the glass to see what it really looked like; and hurried on now with his toilet. The fair Daisy seemed fairer still, her company for two or three hours a rich prospect. The awful boredom vanished, dispersed by a tiny flame of excitement. He fell to whistling his tune.

A glance through the window showed him a few boys drifting out into the grounds. He cast upon them a look of pity. They would be soon assembling for their Sunday crawl, under the direction today of Tarvin himself. Then they would return to produce, under that same paternal eye, their labourious little weekly letters. Poor infants! What a Sunday afternoon they had! But then, just as he was turning away,

two larger figures caught his eye. One was Daisy Callander. And her companion, stepping along so briskly, was the wretched and perfidious Felton. He had sneaked down and captured her, and was now taking her out to tea. He was coolly walking off with Inigo's whole afternoon. Inigo stared at their backs, then noticed the daft hat in his hand, threw the thing across the room, and then stared out again and this time saw nothing—apart from a few idiotic little boys—but a huge and faintly sizzling blankness.

There was just one moment when he might have wept out of sheer self-pity. But he gave his hat a kick, muttered words that he ought not to have known at all, sat down and thought of Felton, of Miss Callander, of the whole burst afternoon, and suddenly he chuckled. Then he went to call on Fauntley, to borrow from that gentleman's ample store a detective tale.

Fauntley was lolling in his old basket-chair, sucking at a pipe and finishing a whisky and soda. He was a large, sagging man, about fifty, with formidable eyebrows, a clipped moustache, a heavy jowl, and a face empurpled by a host of tiny veins. He was also the only really able master in the school. Such scholarships as came its way were snatched by Fauntley, who now and then persuaded himself that a boy had ability and promise and so promptly crammed knowledge into him. Why he should ever have come to Washbury Manor or, having come, should have remained, was a mystery. He seemed to have drifted there out of some queer past. It would be an exaggeration to describe him as that familiar type (in fiction), the brilliant failure; nevertheless, he was a sound scholar—infinitely superior to Tarvin himself—and an old Rugger Blue, and he seemed like a man-of-war rotting in some dilapidated little harbour. He jeered at all modern literature (pointing out its mistakes in grammar), but read enormous numbers of detective stories. Once, and sometimes twice, a week, he disappeared for the whole evening, not returning until very late, and never offered any account of these expeditions. (Inigo periodically shocked Felton by suggesting that their older colleague had a mistress in one of the neighbouring villages.) He was very fond of whisky, and when he had taken a sufficient quantity of it he would either express at length his regret that he had never gone into the Church and then proceed to

denounce all modern civilisation, or relate with a certain scholarly distinction of phrase, which never appeared in his ordinary conversation, any number of dirty stories. Such was Fauntley. It was impossible to dislike him, but it was not difficult to feel that somehow one would be better off in some place where he was not. The sight of him frequently turned Inigo's attention to the thought of other careers.

"Well, Jollifant," Fauntley growled amiably, putting down his glass, "I'm sorry I can't offer you a whisky, but there isn't any more. I had to have that to take the taste of that damned lunch out of my mouth. Sit down."

"I couldn't touch it even if you had any," said Inigo, "not at this hour. I can't drink whisky, somehow, until it's dark. And talking of whisky, it's my birthday tomorrow."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"Good God!" And Fauntley regarded him closely. "Twenty-six. I'd forgotten it existed. But where does the whisky come in?"

"I thought we might celebrate the great event, in the common room after dinner——"

"If you're thinking of asking our worthy Mrs. Tarvin," said Fauntley —who hated her—with a grin, "you'll be disappointed. The Tarvins are dining out tomorrow night, I happen to know. They usually do about this time every year."

"All the better. Felton will be able to get tight in peace, the deep and treacherous dog. But I want two bottles of whisky for the occasion, and I thought you would know where I could get 'em."

"Two bottles, eh? Stout feller!" Fauntley rumbled. "The notice is too short for me to get 'em for you. I know, though. Comrie's the man. He'll get 'em for you by tomorrow night. You'll make sure if you let him know today."

"Good. I'll see the dashing Sergeant, then," said Inigo. "But what becomes of him on Sundays?"

"You've noticed that fair-haired rather tall maid who occasionally waits at table? Her name's Alice."

"And very suitable, too. I know the one you mean. The most buxom and least ill-favoured of our handmaids. But what about her?"

"Give a message to Alice," remarked Fauntley blandly, "and it will reach friend Comrie tonight."

"Well, well, well!" Inigo cocked an eye at his companion. "You'll pardon me for saying so, Mr. Fauntley——"

"Fauntley, please," that gentleman put in, "even if you are about to insult me, as I see you are." But he grinned amiably.

"But you seem to know a devil of a lot about what I might call the inner workings of this establishment. Now I thought I knew everything that's going on in the place——"

"Not you, Jollifant; you flatter yourself. But anyhow, you try it and see. Give Alice a note."

"I will. And you'll join me tomorrow night?"

"Honoured!" grunted Fauntley. They smoked in silence for a minute or two. Then Inigo looked disconsolately out of the window.

"I suppose," he began, "you wouldn't like to come out for a walk."

"You're right, I shouldn't," the other replied. "And when you've been here as long as I have, you won't, either. Besides, I never walk just for the sake of walking. I've no doubt Tarvin will let you take the boys out."

"I've no doubt he would. And I've no doubt Mrs. Tarvin would let me soak the prunes for tomorrow. It won't do. I don't want to live entirely for pleasure. Will you lend me one of your latest masterpieces of crime and detection, something very thin in clues and thick with suspicions?" He began looking about him.

Fauntley yawned. "Take what you like. That one's not bad, *The Straw Hat Mystery*. It'll puzzle your tender brains. I'm going to sleep for an hour."

Inigo crawled away with his book and after a few minutes in his stuffy little room, he decided to go out and read under one of the five trees at the back of the school. On his way out, he came across one of the maids, who promised to give the note he handed her to the fair Alice, busy, it appeared, "a-tidying 'erself." Then he found his tree and proceeded to stun the gigantic and silly afternoon with *The Straw Hat Mystery* which he did not finish because he fell asleep. When he awoke he made a number of discoveries, the most important of them being that it was past tea-time and much cooler and that he

was very stiff and had a slight headache. He limped round to the main entrance just in time to see Miss Callander and Felton arrive there, and to notice that they looked dusty and tired and out of spirits. They were in front, and he let them go without a word.

When Inigo came down, two hours later, to the usual Sunday night cold supper, he was feeling hungry. Everybody was there, but only Mr. Tarvin was making an effort to talk. He was a spectacled pompous little man, with an unusual and quite misleading expanse of forehead and a large and shaggy moustache that had been trained to hide what would undoubtedly be discovered to be a weak little mouth. He had a habit of punctuating his speech with a curious explosive sound, which must be inadequately represented by "chumha." And this was the first thing Inigo heard as he reached the table.

"A—ha, Jollifant!" cried Mr. Tarvin. "Just in time, but only just, as the—er—chumha—Scotsman said of his change."

"What Scotsman?" Inigo enquired, with an innocent glance that immediately became less innocent when it moved round to Fauntley, who raised ponderous eyebrows.

"The exact Scotsman is not specified. Chumha." And Mr. Tarvin began rubbing his hands as he looked at the food before him.

There was the boiled beef, now cold, with beetroot and mashed potatoes. Mrs. Tarvin, however, had a generous plate of cold chicken in front of her. Inigo examined it out of the corner of his eye, and then chanced to meet the wide gaze of Miss Callander, who suddenly lowered her eyes and was troubled by a delicate fit of coughing. They all champed their way through the first course, with Mrs. Tarvin occasionally addressing a remark to Felton, Mr. Tarvin and Fauntley throwing a word at one another, and Miss Callander and Inigo exchanging glances now and then across the table. Inigo was convinced that he was suffering from a fit of deep depression. "My heart aches," he told himself, poking away at a slippery piece of beetroot, "and a drowsy numbness pains. Absolutely." He seemed to have spent nearly all his glittering young manhood eating cold meat with these people.

The plates were changed. Before Mrs. Tarvin a dish of crème caramel and a jug of cream were placed. Then came, for the middle of the table and presumably the remainder of the company, the usual butter

and the wooden slab of cheese—and stewed prunes. They were not even new prunes, Inigo declared angrily to himself; they were old and withered prunes, the very prunes some of them, he was ready to take oath, that he himself had rejected several days ago, prunes that by this time he knew shudderingly by sight.

"No, thank you," he cried when the dish came his way. "Not for me. I don't like prunes. Do you like prunes, Mrs. Tarvin?" he added impudently. There was an instant hush.

"I don't think I've asked you, Mr. Jollifant," she replied coldly, "to consult me about my taste in food. As a matter of fact, I used to be very fond of prunes, very fond of prunes——"

"I thought I was at one time," Inigo put in recklessly, "but now I find I can't stand them."

"But I am not allowed now to eat everything I like," she went on, "not allowed at all. I have to be careful, to be very careful."

"Certainly. Very careful. Chumha," said her husband.

"When you are young, you can eat anything, anything at all," she pursued, "just as sometimes you imagine you can say anything or do anything. Though that is often a mistake, quite a mistake." She looked at him steadily through her steel spectacles, then slowly turned to her neighbour. "What were you saying, Mr. Felton?"

"And, of course, Fauntley, you can't—er—chumha—go on spending public money like—chumha." Mr. Tarvin was rushing in too.

"Did you have a good walk this afternoon, Miss Callander?" Inigo roared across the table. "Have some cheese?"

Ten minutes later, the first to leave the table, they strolled out into the garden together. "I must have a cigarette after that," she whispered. "Can I have a cigarette, please?"

"You can," said Inigo. "But tell me, did you enjoy your walk with Felton this afternoon? I must have the answer to that question before I pour out to you the secrets of my heart."

"Oh, must you! Well, of course I did."

"You did," he said with a stern melancholy. "Then the secrets of this heart are ever denied you."

"Well, then——" she hesitated. They were still in the light of the doorway, and she took the opportunity of showing him her large liquid

orbs. "If you feel like that, I'll confess. I didn't enjoy it much. He's —Mr. Felton's—dullish, isn't he?"

"Felton is very dull. You set my mind at rest. I intended to ask you myself to go for a walk." And he explained at length how he had missed her, then went on: "We'll talk sympathetically under the stars, and tonight I shall call you Daisy."

"Oh, will you? I don't know about that. But listen—you're absolutely in Mrs. Tarvin's bad books. I heard about last night from her; she was furious. And then tonight—those prunes. I thought I should have screamed when you asked her if she didn't like them—the greedy old thing. But really, you'll have to be careful or there's sure to be trouble."

"I am a man," announced Inigo, with a fine Byronic air, "born for trouble. It is only when I'm with you, Miss Call—I mean Daisy, that this restless heart is stilled. Not altogether stilled, mind you, because Beauty itself—er ——"

"Oh, do be quiet," she cried, after waiting in vain for him to tell her what Beauty did. "You're too absurd, and worse than ever tonight. I don't think it's safe being out here with you." Then she lowered her voice, drew closer to him. "But really she is an awful old cat. I'm sure I shall never stick it, I really shan't. She hates me like poison already."

Inigo murmured sympathetically and drew her arm into his. They walked slowly, close together, over the lawn. The night was large and cool-breathing, deep purple with a faint gold glimmer of stars, full of owl-haunted distances. Inigo, squeezing the arm within his, was already embracing the night itself, with which he had fallen instantly in love. But Miss Callander herself, however, was not only shedding certain defects of form and feature, but was even escaping from her own trite prettiness; the night lent her beauty. Could she have borrowed its silence too, she would have been throned even higher in Inigo's imagination.

"I can't do anything right for her," she continued in a rapid whisper. "She grumbles at everything. Oh, and do you know she won't let Mr. Tarvin talk to me alone a single minute? She won't, really. She comes flying up at once, saying 'What's this, what's this?' The day

before yesterday he came and said something to me just outside the door, and she was at the other end of the garden, miles away, and she saw us and came hurrying up—you wouldn't think she could move so fast, but she can—saying 'What's this, what's this?' It's because he's about ten years younger than she is. She keeps her eye on him all the time. As if I wanted—I mean, a dingy little middle-aged man like James Tarvin—isn't it ridiculous? He's my mother's cousin, you know. She can't forgive me for his having engaged me when she was away."

Inigo let her run on, content to give her arm an occasional squeeze and drift into an amorous reverie. They halted near the shrubbery and she grew silent as he glanced from the stars to the dim ivory round of her cheeks. But a noise in the shrubbery made her jump and she clutched at him. He slid an arm round her. "All right," he muttered, "it's nothing." And the arm tightened about her unresisting body.

"I thought—it might be Sturry," she gasped. Sturry was the gardener, a long, shambling, melancholy creature who was subject to epileptic fits. These fits were perhaps the most exciting events at Washbury Manor, and at any time when you were taking a class, droning away at French or History, you might glance through the window and see Sturry falling into a fit outside. All the boys kept their eye on him whenever they could, hoping that it might arrive at their turn to throw up a hand and cry "Please, sir, Sturry——!", sounding gloriously the alarm.

"What would Sturry be doing mouching about here now?" But while Inigo put the question—and tried to make it sound tender and protective—he could not help thinking that it was useless to ask what Sturry was doing anywhere and at any time.

"I don't know," she went on, in a tiny troubled voice, "but he's so horriby queer, isn't he? He follows me up and down. He comes and stands and stares. I see him staring through the window at me sometimes. He frightens me. Yes, he does, really."

"Poor girl," he murmured, drawing her closer. "Never mind the loathsome brute. He won't hurt you."

She said nothing but let her hand rest idly against his coat. Her large eyes, deep and expressionless, were fixed upon his; her face itself,

so close now, was a mysterious silent world; everything of her waited. Inigo knew that the moment had arrived. He kissed her.

"No, no," she whispered when it was done. "You really mustn't." Her face went back about three inches, but was still tilted towards his. He kissed her again, then again, and held her close while she showered upon his face a host of little kisses. All this they did with a certain vague suggestion of absent-mindedness, as if it was really happening in their sleep so that they could not be held responsible for it. Inigo felt triumphant but at the same time a trifle foolish. The trouble was, he had nothing to say. What he was feeling was too strong for the usual idle pretences and yet it was not strong enough to put real words into his mouth. He was rather relieved when she gently disengaged herself and began to move forward.

Before they had moved ten paces, there was another rustling in the shrubbery. "Who's that?" Inigo called sharply. A figure shot out and ran past them. Miss Callander gave a little scream, swung round, and tripped heavily over a stone. Inigo, prepared to give chase to the retreating figure, stopped and found her stretched at full length, whimpering a little.

"It's my ankle," she moaned. "I can't get up. I'm sure it's broken."

It wasn't, but it was badly sprained, they discovered. Inigo got her gingerly to her feet again, and she put one arm round his neck and slowly hobbled back to the house.

Somebody came peering out of the doorway. "Is that you, Daisy?" he called. "And who—chumha—is this?" Mr. Tarvin walked to meet them.

"Miss Callander tripped and fell and sprained her ankle," Inigo explained. And the lady herself, turning a face pale with suffering upon the staring little head master, gave further details.

"We must get you indoors at once. Now lean on me. Chumha. Allow me, Jollifant. That's right. Th-a-at's right." And Inigo found himself dispossessed by his superior, who promptly put an arm round Miss Callander's waist, drew her own arm round his neck and retained the hand he held, and did it all with a certain gusto. The two of them, so affectionately entwined, tottered towards the doorway, and at every step there seemed to be more of Miss Callander and less of Mr. Tarvin.

They were actually standing, swaying there in the light, and Mr. Tarvin was consoling his burden with soft little chumhas, when footsteps came pattering up the hall. Mrs. Tarvin burst round the corner.

"What's this, what's this?" she flung at them, almost before she could see anything. "James! Miss Callander!"

All three began explaining at once, though Mr. Tarvin, in spite of his deficiencies, was easily the loudest and most voluble.

"Indeed! Very unfortunate, most unfortunate, though why Miss Callander should choose to wander about in the dark, I can't imagine. Just take hold of my hand, please, Miss Callander, and see if you can't walk. No, James, stand away, stand away. Not at all necessary, quite unnecessary. Now Miss Callander, if you have no objection to leaning upon me. I will find you a cold water bandage. Yes, cold water, absolutely cold. We shall manage very well, quite well in fact, by ourselves, James." And Mrs. Tarvin moved off, jerking forward her victim and leaving the two men staring at a back that seemed to rustle with indignation.

"Well—er—Jollifant—er—thank you," said Mr. Tarvin; and with an embarrassed chumha he followed, though not too closely, the two women.

Inigo stared after him, and when they had all disappeared he still hung about, filling and lighting his pipe, and feeling vaguely as if he had just slipped out of a theatre in which an idiotic play was being performed. For ten minutes nothing happened at all; nobody came; there was not a sound. Then a noise behind made him turn round, and, with a shock of surprise, he found himself looking at a girl he had never seen before, quite a pretty girl in bright blue, with cheeks like an apple.

"Please, sir," she began. And then he realised that this was Alice, the maid that Fauntley had mentioned, who was to take his message; but Alice without her uniform, in her best clothes, a free and perhaps saucy Alice.

"I took that message, an' Sergeant Comrie 'e says 'e can get them two bottles of whisky tomorrow an' 'e'll let you 'ave 'em in the afternoon an' please will you give 'im the money then. An' 'e says," she continued, breathlessly, "will Old Rob Roy do?"

"Will Old Rob Roy do what?" Inigo enquired solemnly. "I don't

know because I've never met the old gentleman. But he sounds as if he could do almost anything."

She giggled, and then opened her eyes wide at him. "It's the name of the whisky, you know it is. An' will it do, 'e says?"

"Couldn't be better," said Inigo heartily, though he had never heard of it before. "It's for my little birthday party tomorrow night," he added in a confidential whisper. "Suppose I give you the money, could you pass it on and take the bottles in for me? Just, you know, as a special birthday favour." Alice could, and he counted out the twenty-five shillings, gave it to her, then found another half-crown. "You know, I think Comrie's a very lucky man. I didn't recognise you, you're such a tremendous swell in your Sunday clothes. I hope Comrie appreciates them."

"Oh, I don't go with 'im every time 'e likes," cried Alice, tossing her head. "I likes to please myself about that. Sometimes I goes out by myself."

"Yes," said Inigo vaguely, for this was an invitation to which he did not feel he could respond. Nevertheless, he beamed upon her. "I can see that you're a proud girl, Alice. But I hope you're not too proud to accept this for taking my message." And he pressed the half-crown into her palm and folded her fingers round it. His glance fell upon her ripe and smiling mouth. The night was still working obscurely inside him. There was something very inviting about those generous lips.

"Ah, Jollifant," said a voice behind him. Inigo jumped. Mr. Tarvin had returned.

"Alice here," said Inigo blandly, "has been taking a message for me, haven't you Alice?"

"Yes, yes, of course, one of the maids. Alice. I didn't recognise who it was. Chumha." And he looked at her with such interest that Inigo made a note of it, for the benefit of Fauntley.

"I was just saying the same thing myself," Inigo pursued. "I was saying that she was so smart in her Sunday clothes—they are your Sunday clothes, aren't they, Alice?"

"Let me see," Mr. Tarvin reflected, "you've been here how long now?" He seemed to be in no greater hurry to get rid of her than Inigo was.

And it was this last query, keeping him staring there another minute, that was his undoing.

"Oo!" cried Alice.

The two men turned round. Too late! Mrs. Tarvin was upon them. "What's this, what's this? Really now I can't understand, I really can't understand ——"

"I've just been—er—chumha ——"

"Good night, everybody." Inigo left his unhappy head master to explain everything. When he reached the landing that led to his own room, he ran into Felton.

"What have you been doing all night, Jollifant?"

"There are times, Felton," said Inigo, solemnly shaking his head, "when the sight of your bright innocent face, those unstained eye-glasses, that cherubic mouth, the wild yet shy gambols and romps that have brought so many happy hours to Bristol and even Clifton ——"

"Oh, do shut up about Bristol!"

"The very pink that now mantles your youthful cheek—all these things, Felton, at times, I say, go to my heart and there lay a what's its name—a heavy burden, and I tell myself that Washbury Manor has much to answer for. This is one of the times, Felton. I grieve for you. Good night."

III

"Having drunk your health, Jollifant," said Fauntley, his fingers closing round the bottle of Old Rob Roy, "I will now proceed to give you a little good advice." He spoke in that unusually careful and dignified manner often found in men who have just accounted for half a bottle of whisky and are busy pouring out the other half.

This was Monday night and the little birthday party. The revellers had the place to themselves, for the Tarvins were dining out and Miss Callander had retired early, to rest her ankle. Indeed, the tiny common room, which had sufficient haze of smoke and reek of Old Rob Roy to be a highland den, seemed to have removed itself altogether from Washbury Manor. Perhaps one of the trio, Felton, can hardly be described as a reveller. He did not like whisky and was secretly troubled all the time by the thought of what his companions might say or do

under its influence, but being a good-natured and gregarious youth, he did his best, by drowning his tots of liquor in soda water and then taking blind gulps at the stuff, by smoking quite a number of his non-nicotine cigarettes, by laughing whenever the others laughed, to be one of the party. And perhaps Fauntley, who was there to deal justly with the Old Rob Roy, did not quite succeed in revelling. With Inigo himself, however, there can be no such reservations. He was there to do the honours, to drink with and beam upon his companions in misfortune, to forget, to expand. He was not really very fond of whisky but already he had had a great deal more of it than he was accustomed to, and now his lock of hair seemed longer and more troublesome than usual and his smile a trifle broader, his gestures had a certain amplitude and nobility, and his spirit, discovering again the enchanted richness of life, was taking wing.

"But before I give you this advice," Fauntley continued, "I should like to ask you a few questions, in what is—you must understand, Jollifant—a purely friendly spirit. No discourtesy is intended." He brought out these remarks with the care of a pleading K.C. In a few more glasses' time, he would stand at the familiar crossroads, being compelled to go one way and discuss his lost position in the Church and the decay of civilisation or to go the other way and talk bawdy. At the moment, however, he was still free and so was enjoying his capacity to choose, develop, expand, any theme. "My first question is this. Have you any money?"

"About two pound ten," replied Inigo.

"No, not actual money, cash in hand, but means, income, capital."

"Oh, that! I've a private income of about sixty pounds per annum, derived, gentlemen, from investments. One is the Western Gas Company, and the other the Shuttlebury Bag and Portmanteau Corporation. I may add that the Bags and Portmanteaus are a bit rocky."

"Very well. You can't live on that, can you? Still, it's something," said Fauntley, examining the stem of his pipe with great gravity. "My next question is this. What about your people? Have you any expectations? Have you anybody dependent on you?"

"Neither." Inigo took up his glass. "I am, my friends, a man without family. You see before you a Norphan. As a matter of fact, I've an

uncle—he's in the tea trade and lives at Dulwich—who sort of helped to bring me up until I left Cambridge. I was staying with him during the Long. He's a pleasant old stick and the only man I know what still wears a straw hat."

"I know a man who wears one in winter," Felton put in modestly.

"Have another drink, Felton," said Inigo, pushing across the bottle. "In winter, too, eh? There's more in you than meets the eye. An all-the-year-round-bounder, eh? I must tell my uncle that; he'll be furious. But where does this lead us, to what dark clue, Fauntley?"

"My advice to you, Jollifant, is this. Get out of this place. You're only wasting your time. You don't like it, and I don't think it likes you." Fauntley emptied his glass and relit his pipe. "I don't mean go to another school. There are plenty of prep schools better than Washbury, much better, and there are some worse. I've known one or two a damned sight worse."

"You stagger me," cried Inigo.

"Well, I don't know," said Felton, "I've heard of schools——" But what he had heard was never revealed because his troubled piping was completely drowned by Fauntley's heavy bass.

"When all's said and done, these prep schools are not your damned Board or Council schools or whatever they call 'em now—reading and writing factories. A gentleman can still teach in 'em. Don't forget that, you youngsters. These are the only places left for a gentleman."

"No doubt," observed Inigo sadly. "But it's pretty ghastly being a gentleman, isn't it?"

"It's nearly played out," said Fauntley. "And so, by the way, is this bottle. There's another somewhere, isn't there, Jollifant?"

"There is, and I'll open it. But what am I to do when I get out?"

"Well, of course, that's your affair," said Fauntley, who seemed to think that up to this time the conversation had been on some public question, and had all the appearance of a man who had successfully settled it. "I don't pretend to know about these things. But you write a little, don't you? Why don't you become a journalist?"

"Because I was born at least thirty years too late," replied Inigo. "Now if I'd been writing in Henley's time——"

"Good feller, Henley!" Fauntley ejaculated this with such an air

that the wondering Felton, who only knew Henley as the man who was captain of his soul, thought the two must have been at Oxford together.

"I could have done something," Inigo pursued wistfully. "It's too late now, though. Why, I'm working at a thing now, an essay on *The Last Knapsack*—about walking tours, you know—that Henley would have jumped at. But I'm absolutely certain," he added, with prophetic truth, "that there isn't a paper in the country would take it now. No, I've thought about that, and it's useless. Some day, perhaps, I may ——" And he finished the sentence with a graceful gesture; that, no doubt, of a man accepting or refusing several wreaths of laurel.

"That's no good then," said Fauntley so heartily as to be almost brutal. "What else is there? Of course you're devilish clever at the piano—I've heard you—always reminds me of a feller who was up at Merton in my time. He was the cleverest feller I ever heard at a piano, could play and sing you anything, though I can't say it ever did him any good in the long run. The last time I heard of him, he was seen opening oysters—professionally, I mean—in a bar in Sydney. Still," he conceded, "you might be able to make something out of it."

"Some fun, that's all. But, by jingo! I concocted a gorgeous little tune the other night—Saturday, it was. Did you hear it, Felton? It's about the best I've struck." And he began whistling his little tune, and it sounded better than ever.

"Let's have it, Jollifant," said Fauntley.

"What do you mean? Go down to the school-room?"

"I do. A quick one all round ——" and he tipped some Old Rob Roy into the three glasses—"then some music."

"Right you are!" Inigo drank his approval.

"But look here," Felton began, signalling an alarm with his eye-glasses.

"No time to look there, Felton," said Inigo sternly. "Drink up. He's worried because the Tarvin stopped me on Saturday," he explained to Fauntley.

"She's out," said Fauntley, "and I don't know if it would matter if she weren't." And he drank confusion to the woman. "Bring your glasses and a syphon. I've got the bottle." And Felton, sorely troubled, followed them down.

"A little one before you begin," Fauntley suggested, and so Inigo had

another drink. He had never seen a keyboard that looked so inviting. He felt he could do anything with it, any mortal thing. He liked this phrase so much that he found himself repeating it: "Any morr-tal thinggg." It gave him a feeling of joyous confidence. *Terum, perum, perum—pum—pum, trrrum.* That was the fine opening flourish. Now he was sliding into his tune, gently, gently at first. *Rumpty-dee-tidee-dee* —it was undoubtedly better than ever—*rumpty-dee-tidee.* He played it through softly.

"Is that it?" asked Fauntley, out of a golden mist of Old Rob Roy.

"It is. D'you like it?"

"Well, I don't pretend to have any ear, but it seems to me absolutely first-rate, Jollifant, far better than most of the things you hear nowadays. You ought to get somebody to print that. *Rumty-dee.* No, I haven't quite got it. We'll have it again in a minute. Here's luck!"

Inigo emptied his glass in reply, then began playing again. He went through half a dozen tunes of his own, and Fauntley tapped his feet and Felton nodded his head, though a trifle dubiously.

"Bravo!" cried Old Rob Roy, speaking through Fauntley. "You've got a touch, you know, Jollifant, a wonder-ful touch. And a talent, distinctly a talent."

"You heard those tunes of mine?" said Inigo, wheeling round excitedly. "I have a phrase describing 'em, thought of it the other day. They're like a family of elves in dress suits. How's that?"

"Not bad," said Fauntley, "but I'd rather have the tunes. Let's have that first one again."

And Inigo, deciding that as a phrase-maker he was above the heads of his present company, went back to his *Rumpty-dee-tidee-dee,* and this time he crashed it out fortissimo, so that instead of slyly hinting that you might slip round the corner, the tune now loudly defied anybody or anything that would keep you in your place and ended by fairly hurling you round the corner. Fauntley kept time with his glass on the little table near the piano, and even Felton tapped his feet. There was such a noise in the room that a car might have been driven up to the front door, the door might have been opened without anybody there being any the wiser.

Concluding with a final crash, Inigo sprang to his feet.

"And that's the tune," he cried, "that the wretched Tarvin woman, that putter of prunes on other people's plates, stopped me playing the other night."

"A damned shame!" growled Fauntley. "She's an old spoil-sport."

"Yes, I don't like her much, I must say," added Felton, now throwing discretion to whatever winds Old Rob Roy may have known.

"Like her, Felton! I loathe her. What a pair they make! I've not told either of you yet what happened last night." And he plunged excitedly into an account of the proceedings of the night before, beginning with Mr. Tarvin's discovery of Miss Callander outside the door. As soon as he had brought Mrs. Tarvin on to the scene for the first time, Inigo's narrative began to lose its grasp upon truth until at last it was an Arabian Night of embarrassed "chumhas" and "what's this, what's this?"

"Oh, damned good, damned good!" Fauntley was rolling in his chair. "I don't believe a word of it, Jollifant," he roared. "But it's damned good."

"Honest truth, I assure you!" Inigo roared in reply. He was sitting down now and the three of them had their heads together. "So she came along, crying 'what's this, what's this, what's this? I can't understand, I really can't understand. Now tell me, tell me, tell me.' 'Well, you see,' said poor old Tarvin, 'you see—chumha.' 'No, I don't see chumha. I don't see chumha at all,' she screamed back at him. 'I see you talking to a girl, a girl, quite young, a young girl. I cannot have you talking to a girl, cannot have it at all, not at all.'" Inigo stopped for a moment, exhausted.

"She never said that, though," Fauntley roared again. "You can't tell me she said that."

"No, I know she didn't." Inigo sprang up, flung back his wandering lock, then slapped his knee. "But don't you see I'm giving you the soul of the thing, absolutely? That's what she meant."

"Is it, is it indeed?" It came in a scream of rage from the door at the other end. There stood Mrs. Tarvin.

The shock, the sight of her standing there, coming at the end of a long crescendo of excitement, cut the last binding thread of self-control

in Inigo. Up jumped Old Rob Roy himself to answer. "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hag!" he thundered down the room.

"What!" she shrieked, and swept forward, followed by her husband. "What did you say? You're a drunken rowdy. I've never been so insulted in all my life. And by one of our own masters! I've never heard, never never heard, of such a thing. The school-room a taproom, mimicry and insults and abuse! Why don't you say something, say something, James? Tell him to leave the place at once."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Jollifant," said Mr. Tarvin as sternly as he could. "You're—er—drunk. Chumha."

Fauntley was trying to rouse himself. "He's a bit tight, Tarvin. Birthday. Get him to bed."

"Pardon me, Fauntley, but I'm perfectly sober," said Inigo. "And I refuse to be got to bed."

"Is this—this—this fellow to stay here?" demanded Mrs. Tarvin of her husband, in a passion.

"Of course not. Expect resignation," muttered Mr. Tarvin.

"He must leave in the morning, in the morning. I won't have him here a moment longer, not a moment." Her rage seemed to increase.

"Quite understand. Chumha. Disgraceful business," her husband muttered again. "Rather awkward, though, to leave in the morning."

"And why, pray?"

"Well, to begin with, must have term's notice. Chumha."

"In short," said Inigo, making a sweeping gesture but speaking quite distinctly, "if I leave in the morning you must pay me a term's salary. Fifty-two pounds. A mere pittance, but mine own."

"I don't care about that," cried Mrs. Tarvin, looking at Inigo as if he were a kind of reptile, then glaring at her husband. "I won't have him here any longer, not a day, not a day. I knew what it would be from the first, from the very first. Another of your ridiculous appointments. I'll have him out tomorrow whatever it costs."

"Very well, my dear," said Mr. Tarvin, who knew only too well where all the money came from. "We will have to manage somehow—chumha—for a week or so. You will—er—have your term's cheque in the morning, Jollifant, and leave us then."

"I should think so indeed, I should think so," cried Mrs. Tarvin. At

this moment, Inigo was trying to close the lid of the piano and not succeeding very well because he had failed to notice that a large match-box had been left on the keys. "Don't touch that piano, don't touch it," she went on. "Take yourself off to bed and get ready to leave in the morning."

"I am not leaving in the morning," Inigo announced loudly.

"Certainly you are."

"Oh no, I'm not. I'm leaving tonight. Now."

"Don't be an ass, Jollifant," said Fauntley, putting a hand on his arm. "You can't leave tonight. It's impossible."

"Not at all impossible. An excellent idea."

"There's no train," Fauntley pursued. "You couldn't go anywhere."

"I can walk," said Inigo triumphantly. "I can put a knapsack on my back and walk. I leave tonight. It's not raining, is it? Is it raining, Felton?"

"I—er—I don't know," stammered poor Felton, who had been busy trying to efface himself for the last five minutes.

"I'm surprised, very surprised, at you, Mr. Felton," said Mrs. Tarvin severely. "I expected better things of *you.*"

"Felton was dragged into this," said Inigo, "because I told him it was my birthday. Felton can't resist a birthday, can you, Felton? Mr. Tarvin, I'm leaving tonight and so I will ask you to make my cheque out now." He spoke very slowly and carefully.

"This is—er—chumha—ridiculous, Jollifant. You'll have to go, of course, but still—er—chumha."

"Let him go, let him go," cried Mrs. Tarvin. "We shall only be spared trouble in the morning. I don't see why we should have to make out cheques at this time of night, but the sooner he goes the better, and if he has to sleep in a ditch, it's no concern of ours, no concern at all. Mr. Felton, kindly remove these filthy glasses and open all the windows. This place is disgusting, disgusting." She turned a still quivering back upon them and marched out.

Quarter of an hour later, Inigo had his cheque in his pocket and had packed his immediate necessaries in a knapsack. "I'll tell you where to forward the trunk and the suit-case," he said to Fauntley, who was looking on. "Keep an eye on these things, will you, until I want them?

It must be twelve, isn't it? And I don't feel a bit sleepy and it's a fine night and I've finished with this place and I needn't look for another for some time and I don't give a damn. I call it a glorious exit."

"And I call it damned silly," said Fauntley, grinning. "And God knows how we shall manage those classes next week, or what sort of blighter the agencies will rake up for Tarvin. But good luck, Jollifant! Here, there's a spot of whisky left. We'll have a parting drink."

They were having it when Felton looked in. "You're really going then? I told Miss Callander you were. She looked out of her bedroom and asked me what was the matter. Can I do anything, Jollifant?"

Inigo shook him by the hand. "Not a thing but say good-bye. I commend your soul to the Eternal Verities, Felton, though I haven't the least notion what they are. We shall meet again sometime, I feel it in my bones." By this time, he had put on a raincoat and swung his knapsack over it, found his hat and a fierce ash stick, and was ready to go. Fauntley went out with him. As they passed her door, Miss Callander looked out. "I'll be with you in a minute," Inigo whispered to Fauntley, and stayed behind.

"You really are going?" Miss Callander, in her dressing-gown, looked rather like a pink rabbit. She opened her eyes as wide as possible and her mouth hardly at all.

"I'm sacked and I'm going."

"You crazy boy!" she whispered. "I'm awfully sorry. It will be my turn next, very soon, and really I shan't be sorry, I really shan't."

Inigo looked at her steadily, with a small friendly smile. "I should try Egypt if I were you."

She nodded confusedly. "I've just been—been writing there. Oh, but—I've got something for you." She produced a little packet. "It's only some biscuits and chocolate, but I don't suppose you've got anything to eat with you, have you? And you'll get awfully hungry."

Inigo was really touched. It came to him in a flash that nobody had done anything like this for him for years. He had been living almost entirely in a world of services for money. "Daisy Callander," he cried softly, "you're a brick. I'm tremendously grateful. I'd forgotten how hungry I should be in an hour or two."

"Where are you going?"

He stared at her. "Do you know, I'd entirely forgotten that. I've no idea where I'm going. I shall just walk and walk. Good-bye—and good luck!" He held out his hand.

She slipped her hand into his instead of shaking it. Then she raised her face a little. "Good-bye," she said, rather tearfully.

He realised that she wanted him to kiss her. Strangely enough, though he had never liked her more than he did at this moment, he did not want to kiss her. But he did kiss her, gently, then gave her hand a final squeeze, and hurried downstairs to find Fauntley waiting for him at the front door.

"Fine, but coldish and black as pitch," said Fauntley. "In an hour you'll wish you'd stayed here and gone to bed. You'd better change your mind now."

"Not I," said Inigo, peering out. "I like the smell of it. I'll push on, Peterborough way."

"You're a young ass, Jollifant."

"And I'll let you know what happens to me, Fauntley, give you an outline of my adventures till we meet again."

"I repeat, Jollifant, you're an ass. And if I were twenty years younger, I should come with you."

Two minutes later, Fauntley had bolted the door and Inigo had turned out of the grounds into the lane, walking quickly westward.

Chapter Four

MR. OAKROYD ON T'ROAD

I

When Mr. Oakroyd dashed out of the house and hurried down Ogden Street with his little basket trunk in one hand and his bag of tools in the other, he had no idea where he was going. He only knew he was going somewhere, that night, at once. The thought of taking a train at such a late hour somehow frightened him, for it seemed the act of a desperado. He had only once taken a train at night in all his life and that had been in the company of six hundred other citizens of Bruddersford. He saw himself being arrested at the ticket office.

"Na Jess!" somebody cried.

"Na lad!" he called back, hurrying on and wondering who it was. He walked so quickly now and was so busy with his thoughts that outside "T'Mucky Duck," turning into Woolgate, he ran full tilt into somebody, a big man.

"'Ere, weer the 'ell are yer coming to!" shouted the big man. Then he saw who it was. "Eh, it's Jess Oakroyd. Weer yer going, Jess?"

"Off for me holidays, Sam," replied Mr. Oakroyd, slipping away and leaving the big man staring.

These little encounters seemed to make the situation more desperate. It was then that he thought of Ted, Oglethorpe's nephew, who had said last night that he could have a trip whenever he wanted one. Loading at Merryweather's in Tapp Street, up to eleven o'clock or after, and then going somewhere down South—where was it?—Nuneaton. That was it. He felt immensely relieved at the thought that Ted would give him a lift down South. It would probably mean sitting on the bales at the back of the lorry all night, but this prospect did not daunt him.

He rather liked the idea of jolting his way out of Bruddersford in this fashion.

Tapp Street, near the centre of the town, is a short street full of offices and warehouses, and any time after seven it looks dark and is almost deserted. There was only one sound now to be heard in the street, but no sooner had Mr. Oakroyd, turning the corner, heard it, than he quickened his pace at once. It was the sound of a lorry engine, an urgent throb-throb. As Mr. Oakroyd trotted up towards it, the engine burst into a roar. In another minute the lorry would be off. "Hi!" cried Mr. Oakroyd, and fairly ran now. It was quivering with impatience.

"Here Ted," shouted Mr. Oakroyd, "I'm coming wi' yer."

A face he could not see distinctly looked from the driver's seat. "Less noise, mate," it said hoarsely. "An' if yer coming, yer'll have to get on at the back. There's only room for two 'ere in front. 'Urry up. Take it or leave it."

This was certainly not Ted's voice, but Mr. Oakroyd did not trouble his head about that. "All right," he gasped, and hoisted his two bags on the back. Fortunately the lorry was not fully loaded and there was room at the sides, where the tarpaulin-covered bales or pieces did not come to the very edge. But he had still to hoist himself up, and he had not succeeded in doing this when the lorry started, so that he was carried several yards down Tapp Street with his legs swinging in mid-air. It was only by a tremendous effort that he pulled himself over the side, and even then he barked his shins and knees. After resting a minute or two, he contrived to remove himself and his two bags to where there was space enough between the backboard and the tarpaulin pile for him to sit down and make himself snug.

It was grand. They bumped and rattled on at a surprising pace, and Mr. Oakroyd in triumph watched the Bruddersford warehouses and shops and trams start up, quiver, and then retreat. With great dexterity, he filled and lighted a pipe of *Old Salt,* which had itself somehow achieved a new and adventurous flavour, and smoked it with a real old saltish air, like a man on the lookout to make the landfall of Cape Cambodia. Through valedictory puffs of smoke, he saw Bruddersford itself slide away, the hills rise up, a vague blackness, the street-lamps of

distant and ever-retreating suburbs take on the shape and glitter of constellations. Other towns, Dewsbury, Wakefield, closed round him and then shook themselves off again. It was colder now, and he shivered a little in his thin mackintosh. He was still warmed, however, by a feeling of triumphant escape. He didn't care where they landed in the morning. They were going on and on, and it was grand.

Then there came a great moment. He had been dozing a little but was roused by the lorry slowing down, sounding its horn, then swinging round into a road that was different from any they had been on so far. It was as smooth and straight as a chisel, and passing lights showed him huge double telegraph posts and a surface that seemed to slip away from them like dark water. Other cars shot past, came with a blare and a hoot and were suddenly gone, but the lorry itself was now travelling faster than he thought any lorry had a right to travel. But at one place they had to slow down a little, and then Mr. Oakroyd read the words painted in large black letters on a whitewashed wall. *The Great North Road*. They were actually going down the Great North Road. He could have shouted. He didn't care what happened after this. He could hear himself telling somebody—Lily it ought to be—all about it. "Middle o' t'night," he was saying, "we got on t'Great North Road." Here was another town, and the road was cutting through it like a knife through cheese. Doncaster, it was. No trams now; everybody gone to bed, except the lucky ones going down South on the Great North Road.

"By gow!" he cried, "this is a bit o' life, this is. Good old Ted! Good old Oglethorpe! I owe him summat for this." And he yearned with gratitude towards the thought of Ted and his companion at the wheel, settled himself as snugly as he could, and in spite of his excitement soon began to doze again.

He might have fallen fast asleep had he not been wakened by a very curious incident. There was somebody shouting. The lorry made a grinding noise, seemed to hesitate. "Hey there!" came the shout. "Wait a minute, wait a minute." It was a policeman. The lorry had passed him now, but he came running after it. There was a roar, a fearful rattling, and the lorry rushed on, obviously being pressed to go as hard as it could. The policeman dropped behind, but he was near

enough for Mr. Oakroyd to see him. He stood still but moved his hand. Above the din of the lorry sounded the policeman's whistle, that horribly urgent shrilling. Again and again it sounded, but now they were rapidly gaining speed and soon left it far behind. Mr. Oakroyd, looking and listening still, his face above the rattling backboard, was startled and amazed. The whistle rang in his ears yet, asking questions. What did it mean? What was Ted up to? Why had the policeman tried to stop them? Had they been going too quickly? This was the obvious explanation but somehow it did not satisfy himself. There was something very queer about this. He was quite awake now.

Having decided to act queerly, the lorry did not return to normal behaviour. It raced along at a monstrous pace, jolting Mr. Oakroyd until he was breathless, bruised and terrified, and several times it seemed in danger of crashing into other cars, only swerving at the last moment and being followed by angry shouts. Mr. Oakroyd had begun to wonder whether it would be possible to creep along to the front to yell at Ted, ask him if he had gone crazy, when suddenly the lorry swung round, throwing him against the backboard, and turned down a narrow side-street. It went several miles down this road at the same mad pace, and the jolting was now worse than ever. Then it turned again, this time into a road still narrower, a winding lane full of ruts and overhanging branches of trees that seemed to miss them by inches, and now it was compelled to slow down to what seemed in comparison a mere crawl. Mr. Oakroyd was able to take breath, look about him into the mysterious night, and think a little. He had hardly collected his thoughts, however, before the lorry, arriving at a tiny open space where this road met another, came to a standstill, much to his relief. It was all right going down the Great North Road in the middle of the night, but this had been a bit too much. He rose, gingerly, to his feet.

"Where's that screw driver?" he heard from the front. It was the voice of the man who had spoken to him in Tapp Street.

It went on: "That's right. Better stay 'ere, Nobby, and gimme the office if yer see anybody." The man was climbing out.

"D'yer think 'e took it?" asked the other.

Mr. Oakroyd was astonished. That wasn't Ted's voice. Ted was not on the lorry at all, then.

"Whether 'e 'as or 'e 'asn't, I'm risking nothing," said the first man. "There's no going straight through now, and 'owever far we go round, this lorry's got to 'ave another bloody number before we see daylight. 'Ere, Nobby, yer might as well get down. Chuck us them number plates."

At this point Mr. Oakroyd thought that he might as well get down too. He fell rather than climbed out—for he was stiff and shivering with cold—and tottered round to the front, rubbing his hands.

" 'Ello, 'ello!" cried the first man, staring. "I'd fergotten all about yer, mate. You've 'ad yer liver and lights shaken up all right, 'aven't yer?"

"I have an' all," replied Mr. Oakroyd grimly. "But where's Ted?"

"Ted? Ted? Oo the 'ell's Ted?" demanded the other. And then he stepped forward and peered into Mr. Oakroyd's face. "And oo the 'ell are you, anyhow? 'Ere, Nobby, this isn't 'im."

"Isn't it?" said Nobby, stepping forward too. He was a large man, well muffled up, with a very small hat crammed down on his head. It was his turn now to stare at Mr. Oakroyd. "No begod, it isn't at all. It's a stranger. He's a stranger to me, Fred."

"And to me. 'Ere, wot's the idea?" he demanded fiercely.

"Ar d'yer mean wot's the idea?" asked Mr. Oakroyd valiantly.

"I mean wot's the bloody idea, that's wot I mean," he repeated with passion.

Mr. Oakroyd felt very uncomfortable indeed. "Well, this is Ted Oglethorpe's lorry, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't Ted anybody's lorry, this isn't. It's our lorry, this is, and I want ter know wot yer doing on it." This Fred was a hoarse-voiced truculent sort of fellow, one of those who pushed their faces close to yours when they talked, and at every succeeding word he seemed to grow angrier.

Mr. Oakroyd might feel uncomfortable, and indeed he could not help feeling a little lost and forlorn, miles from anywhere in the night as he was, in the company of two fellows whom he now suspected to be downright rogues; but he was anything but a coward and he had his own share of pugnacity. "I come on it because I thought it belonged to a friend o' mine," he said sturdily. "And you said nowt to stop me neither when I said I were coming."

"I took yer for somebody else," said Fred sullenly.

"And I took you for somebody else," said Mr. Oakroyd. "So that's that."

"Well, yer came and yer 'ere and now yer'd better be moving on." And Fred turning his back on Mr. Oakroyd, began whistling.

"Half a minute, though," said Nobby; "we'd better have a bit of a talk about this." And he beckoned Fred, and the two of them walked away and began whispering. Mr. Oakroyd overheard several phrases, of which one—"knows too much"—was repeated more than once by Nobby.

"If you want to change these numbers," Mr. Oakroyd called out, "get on wi' it. It's nowt to do wi' me."

"Not so loud, not so loud," said Fred, returning with his companion. "All right, Nobby, I'll get on with it. You can do the patter. Only for God's sake keep it quiet." He busied himself with the front number plate.

Nobby brought his large mysterious bulk close to Mr. Oakroyd, and when he spoke his accents were bland and conciliatory. "And where might you be making for, Mister?"

"Well, you see, I thowt I'd move down South for a bit," explained Mr. Oakroyd. "Leicester way p'raps. I've been there afore an' I'm out of a job and so I thowt I'd try a move."

"Going at a funny time, wasn't you?" pursued Nobby, still blandly but with a certain significant emphasis.

"Ay, I was moving late—like you. But this 'ere friend o' mine had told me he'd be there late, you see, at Merryweather's i' Tapp Street."

"That's all right, Nobby," grunted Fred, bending over his task. "Saw it further down and it got off about ten minutes afore we did."

"Quite so, quite so," said Nobby smoothly. Then he lowered his voice. "The fact of the matter is, Mister—I dare say you thought one or two things about this job was a bit queer like, didn't you?—but the fact of the matter is, me and Fred here hasn't got a licence—driving licence, you know—between us, and so we're having to do a bit of dodging."

"It's no business o' mine," replied Mr. Oakroyd reflectively, "but I don't see how changing t'numbers is going to help you if you haven't

got a licence. You can be pulled up, just t'same. Still, you know your own business."

Nobby made a smacking noise with his lips, perhaps to suggest that he was thinking deeply. "It's no good, Mister," he said at length, "I can see it's no good trying to deceive you. You're too smart for that. Well, it's like this." And now he whispered with a most engaging conspiratorial air. "A genelman of my acquaintance is a partner in a firm. Right. He has a bit of a barney with the other two partners, decides to have a split. Right. He takes so much stock, they take so much. But he can't get his, they won't part. It's his but they won't part till they're forced. He comes to me and asks me to get it away for him. Once it's gone, all right, no trouble. It'll save a law job. They can't get at him 'cos it's his stuff, but they could get at us for getting it out of the warehouse. We knew that, me and Fred, when we took it on, but we're sportsmen, we are, and we'll take a bit of a risk obliging a friend, we will."

"Ay," said Mr. Oakroyd, who did not believe a word of all this. "So you're keeping it quiet like. And who did you think I was?"

"Well, you see, Mister, there was a feller in the warehouse we'd got to know," began Nobby hopefully.

"Ay," said Mr. Oakroyd, cutting him short. He had suspected some time that he had travelled with a lorry-load of stolen goods, probably pieces of expensive cloth. The trick had been worked before in Bruddersford, and he knew all about it. At the moment he did not feel any particular loyalty towards the manufacturers of his native town, whose warehouses could all be rifled for all he cared, so that his conscience did not trouble him overmuch, but at the same time it was not easy to feel comfortable in such company and he thought that the sooner he left it the better. Yet when he considered the chill darkness, the lonely place, his own position, any company seemed better than none for the time being.

Fred appeared now. "If they're looking for WR 7684, they'll be looking a bloody long time," he announced. "Now what's on? Is this where 'e gets off or does 'e work 'is passage a bit further?" And he glanced from Nobby to Mr. Oakroyd.

The latter regarded him without enthusiasm. "T'other's bigger rogue,

I'll be bound," he told himself, "but he is a bit friendly wi' it. This chap 'ud knock you on t'head wi' a big spanner as soon as look at you." He thought it wiser to let Nobby answer for him.

"He's all right," said Nobby. "We can take him a bit further. He's a sportsman, he is. Best thing we can do is to lay up a bit. Can't get through to London now," he added, lowering his voice and addressing himself to Fred; "that's finished. We'll have to wire him tomorrow and make the other way."

"All right, mate," said Fred. "I could do with a bit of shut-eye and a drink and a bite of something."

"So could I," said Nobby, who seemed to be thinking deeply.

And Mr. Oakroyd realised that he could, too. He felt cold and hungry, heavy for lack of sleep.

"Not a bleedin' chance round 'ere," said Fred disgustedly. "We're right off the rotten map."

"Half a minute, half a minute," cried Nobby. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere between Rotherham and Nottingham. There's a signpost there. See wot it says. But 'urry up, for God's sake. Let's get moving."

"Good enough!" cried Nobby, after he had inspected the signpost. "I've been round here before all right. You can't lose me, chum."

"Wot's the idea?"

"I'll show you," said Nobby, with enthusiasm. "You shut your eyes and open your mouth and see what God sends you. We can lay her up a bit and have our drink and shut-eye all right. Drive on, Fred. I'll show you. Get up at the back, Mister, if you're coming with us."

"I'm coming all right," said Mr. Oakroyd, who had been shivering for the last ten minutes. He moved off, to climb up again.

"Big Annie. Keeps the Kirkworth Inn," he heard Nobby say, in reply to some further question from Fred. "You must have been there, or heard of her. She's all right, Annie is."

For the next hour and a half they threaded their way slowly and drearily through narrow by-roads, sometimes having to go back for a missed turning. Mr. Oakroyd was very sleepy now, but he felt chilled through and as empty as a drum, and so could do nothing but fall into an uneasy doze for a minute or two. All the earlier excitement of the

night had left him, and more than once he could not help wishing, in spite of himself, that he was back in his own bed. As the lorry went rattling and jolting into the most cheerless hours of the night, he began to regret, in a numbed fashion, that he had ever set eyes on it.

When they pulled up at last outside the Kirkworth Inn, a lonely little house at a crossroads, with a wide entrance to a yard at one side, the situation did not seem to be much better. The Inn stared at them through the gloom with blind eyes. Mr. Oakroyd could not see them ever finding their way into it. But he climbed down with the others and stood looking up at its shuttered windows.

"Sure it'll be all right?" asked Fred uneasily. "We've made a 'ell of a bad break if we tell 'er oo we are and then there's nothing doin'. Got us taped then."

But Nobby was still confident. "Leave it to me. She knows me and I know her. It'll be all right." And he walked boldly up to the door and rapped upon it. Nothing happened, so after waiting a minute or two he rapped again. They heard a window being pushed up, and then a very angry female voice cried: "Wot is it? Wot yer making that noise for? Wot d'yer want?"

Nobby called up: "Is that you, Annie? It's me, Nobby Clarke. You remember me?"

"Who is it?" she screeched.

"Nobby Clarke. You remember me. Been here before. Pal of Chuffy and Steve and that lot. Remember the Yarmouth do, Annie?"

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, wot yer want coming at this time for, knocking me up?"

"You slip down and I'll tell you all about it, Annie. Me teeth's chattering here so much I can't talk."

The head withdrew, grumbling, and after a minute or two the door was opened and Nobby went in.

"Nobby's pullin' it off," the relieved Fred confided to Mr. Oakroyd. "Soon as I see 'er come down, I knew it was all right. They've only got to listen an' Nobby'll talk 'em into anything. Gor, 'e can talk." And Fred spat out very noisily to show his appreciation, then lit about half an inch of cigarette.

Nobby came bustling out in triumph. "All right, chums," he cried.

"It's a go. We can camp here a bit. Shove the old bus round at the back, Fred, up in the yard. You go round with him, Mister. We'll let you both in there."

Mr. Oakroyd followed the lorry round to the yard, took out his little basket trunk and bag of tools, and was then admitted with Fred into a kitchen at the back of the inn. A lamp had already been lit there, and Nobby, now revealed as a tall fattish fellow, with close-cropped hair, a purple expanse of cheek, and a huge loose mouth, was blowing at the hot ashes, now heaped up with fresh wood, with a gigantic pair of bellows. The kitchen was untidy and dirty, and its owner was untidier and dirtier still, an enormous figure of a middle-aged woman mysteriously wrapped about in yards and yards of filthy flannel.

"This is Annie, Mrs. Croucher," said Nobby, putting down the bellows to wave a hand. "And this is Fred—Fred ——"

"Smith," put in that gentleman, whose appearance was even less reassuring than his talk. His face was long and thin and was all twisted to one side, and he might have been any age between twenty-five and forty-five.

"Fred Smith," continued Nobby blandly. "And he's on the job with me, he is. And this other's a chap who's been travelling with us owing to a bit of a mistake." And he looked questioningly at Mr. Oakroyd.

"Oakroyd's my name."

"Oakroyd's his name, and he's a sportsman else he wouldn't be with us." And Nobby fell to blowing the fire again and soon had it blazing.

"Well, lads, wot's it yer want?" demanded their hostess. "'Cos if it's steaks and chips and feather beds, you've got a bloody hope."

"Anything, Annie, anything," replied Nobby. "A bit of bread and meat, if you've got it. And a drink. What's it to be, chum? Beer's too cold. I'll tell you what. I'd like a drop o' tea with some rum in it, good old sergeant-major's."

"That's the stuff, mate," said Fred.

"It'll do me a treat," said Mr. Oakroyd, who was just beginning to feel warm again but still suffered from a gnawing hollow inside him. He looked hopefully at the formidable Annie.

"Anything to oblige," said Annie, "and I'll take a drop wi' yer. 'Ere, Nobby, put this kettle on." She produced the remains of a cold joint

of beef, a loaf of bread and some butter, four half-pint mugs and a bottle of rum. She and Nobby made the tea, Fred hacked away at the joint, and Mr. Oakroyd, not to be left out, cut half-a-dozen thick slices of bread. He was beginning to enjoy himself again. This was a queer lot, to be sure, but it would all make a grand tale to tell. He rubbed his hands as Nobby brought the steaming teapot on to the table, and the landlady, who was not disposed to be incautious even at this hour of the night, measured out a noggin of rum.

All three of them fell with fury upon their sandwiches and washed them down noisily and happily with the tea, which was very strong, very sweet, and well laced with rum. After the landlady had gulped down a hot mixture that was as much liquor as tea, she set her massive flannelled bulk, arms akimbo, before the crackling fire, and watched them with an indulgent, almost maternal eye. "That's putting some 'eart into yer, I can see," she observed complacently. "And wot's the next move, lads?"

"Shut-eye," announced Fred, from the depths of his enormous sandwich.

"That's right," said Nobby. "Just pass the little old brown jug, will you, Mister? This'll stand a bit more rum. Yes, we'll have to kip down for an hour or two, Annie."

"It'll 'ave to be down 'ere," said Annie. "But put a bit o' wood on the fire an' you'll be all right."

"Leave it to us, Annie. And here's the best." Nobby raised his mug and emptied it in her honour. "You've done us proud, you have. We're all right. Leave it to us."

"Going to," said Annie. "Gettin' back to bed now. I'll 'ear 'ow the game's goin' and all the news in the morning. And for God's sake don't show a light in front. And 'ere, I'll take the damages now. It'll be six shillings the lot, which is cheap enough, seein' yer've 'ad a noggin o' rum between yer."

"Good enough," said Nobby, fumbling in his pockets.

Then Mr. Oakroyd, full of tea and rum and beef and bread, feeling cosy, companionable and sleepy, did a foolish thing. "Here," he cried, "I'm a chap as likes to stand me corner. I'll pay for this. Six shillin', is it?" He searched his pockets but could only discover a solitary six-

pence. He must have put all the loose money he had with his week's wages on the table at home. But he had four five-pound notes enclosed in an old envelope and tucked away in his breast pocket. "Half a minute," he said, and in his anxiety to foot the bill promptly, he was clumsy and brought out all four banknotes.

"Gor!" cried Fred, bending forward. "Oo's this we 'ave with us?—Mr. bloody Rockiefeller. Been touchin' up a bank, mate?"

Mr. Oakroyd looked to see three pairs of eyes fixed on his banknotes and, feeling uncomfortable, he hastily put three of them back in the envelope and held out the fourth. "Can you change this, Missis?"

"No, I can't," she replied very emphatically. "An' if I could, I wouldn't. Yer don't land me with one of 'em, oh no! Yer've been doin' well, 'aven't yer?" she added significantly.

"All right, Mister. All right, Annie," Nobby put in smoothly. "I'll settle this. Six shillings."

"Be good then, an' turn that light out as soon as you get down to it." And Big Annie removed the bottle of rum, locked the door of the bar, and retired. The three men yawned and, on the advice of Nobby, who insisted upon repeating, "Boots off's half a bed," they took off their boots. In the survey of the room and discussion that immediately followed, Mr. Oakroyd, to his gratified surprise, was awarded the old sofa in the corner.

"You're best off there, Mister," said Nobby earnestly, "and you're entitled to it, as a sportsman. Isn't he, Fred?"

"'E can 'ave it for me," muttered Fred, spreading himself across two chairs.

Mr. Oakroyd would have liked to have smoked a last and even more adventurous pipe of *Old Salt,* to have heard tales of Big Annie and Chuffy and the "Yarmouth do," to have talked about the Great North Road, but he was tired out and now that he was warm and comfortably stretched out on the sofa, with a little glow of rum inside him, he could hardly keep his eyes open. He was aware vaguely that Nobby was bending over the lamp, blowing it out, that now there was only a flicker of firelight; dreamily he felt the lorry jolting him again, caught a ghastly glimpse of the Great North Road; and then fell fast asleep.

II

A strident voice filled the kitchen. Mr. Oakroyd grunted, half opened his eyes and then closed them again. For a few blessed moments there was a silence. Then the voice came again, screeching and cutting like a bad circular saw. This time Mr. Oakroyd stirred, shook himself, and opened his eyes as widely as he could. What he saw astonished him. For years he had opened his eyes in the morning to see the front bedroom of 51, Ogden Street, Bruddersford, and now, for a minute or two, he could not make out where he was. It took him some time to recollect in order the events of the previous night, to realise that this was the first morning of his travels and, incidentally, the last Tuesday in September. The soul of him still slumbered and what was awake was yet only the mere creature of habit, so that the feeling of being uprooted and suddenly dropped in some strange place brought him no pleasure. And he was still heavy and bemused from lack of sleep; his head ached a little; his body was stiff and sore. It was not a pleasant waking. Last night he seemed to have fallen asleep in an atmosphere of friendliness, but now everything seemed to be different. He raised himself so that he could look over the neighbouring table, and caught sight of the enormous back of the landlady, who was padding out of the kitchen into the passage, and a dirty-looking girl in her teens was just coming in from the yard.

"Hello!" he said to the girl. He was standing up now, stretching himself.

She stared at him dully. "'Ello!" she said. "Time you woke too."

"What time is it?" he asked. He did not possess a watch. Bruddersford has an elaborate system of factory buzzers—usually known as "whews"—that keeps its humbler citizens informed of the time.

"'Alf-pass-teight. Missis told me to wake yer."

Mr. Oakroyd looked about him. "'Ere," he cried, "where's t'other two?"

"Gone."

"Gone?" He looked at her, bewildered.

"Missis said so. I never seed 'em. They must ha' gone before I come in."

He looked out into the yard. No lorry was there. He turned round to find Big Annie herself regarding him with marked disfavour. Grimy, swollen, purple-faced, with little greedy bloodshot eyes, she seemed even more unpleasant and formidable now in daylight than she had done last night.

"That's right," she cried shrilly, "they've gone an' long since. Time you went too. I can't do with yer 'ere."

"All right, all right, Missis," he replied, trying to smile at her and not succeeding. "I don't want to be in t'way. But I've no but just now wakened up. Give us a chance. I suppose I can have a bit of a wash like an' summat to eat, a bit o' breakfast?"

"No, that yer can't." She was quite passionate in her refusal.

"Why, what's up, Missis? I can pay for owt I have."

"No, yer can't pay for it, not 'ere. I don't want your sort 'ere."

"Ar d'you mean 'my sort'?" he demanded, his pugnacity aroused. "What's wrong wi' my sort? If you said them sort as brought me here last night, yer friend Nobby an' t'other chap, I'd know what you was talking about. I know that sort, let me tell you——"

"'Ere," she cried in a fury, "I don't want any bloody argy-bargying. They've gone, and that's all about it. You go now, sharp as yer can. I've told yer I don't want yer 'ere." She turned and went padding away. At the door, however, she wheeled round. "An' don't try comin' 'ere again, either, 'cos yer won't get in, let me tell yer. Huh! My sort!" She gave him another elephantine snort and then turned her back on him again.

Mr. Oakroyd pulled his little brown cap firmly over his head, fastened his mackintosh to the basket trunk again, and took up his bag of tools. "I'm off then," he said to the girl. "I suppose there's other places where I can get a wash and a bite. I don't seem to be what you might call in favour here. What's matter with her?"

"I dunno. Old bitch!" the girl said vindictively.

"Well, you know her better ner I do," observed Mr. Oakroyd. "And I must say this going out mucky an' empty's nowt i' my line. Nar where do I get to from here? Where's t'nearest place where I can get a bit of a wash and suchlike, summat to eat?"

The girl came out into the yard with him. "Yer best way's to yer

right, straight on then," she said. "Capbridge is first, but that's no good, only a little place. Yer want to foller the road on to Everwell. Yer'll be all right there. There's tea-rooms and all sorts in Everwell."

"I should think so with a name like that," said Mr. Oakroyd. "And how far's this Everwell then?"

"Five or six miles. Turn to yer right and straight on then, through Capbridge, and straight on again. Yer can't miss it."

"Any trams or buses or owt?"

"There's a bus comes past 'ere at two," she replied.

"Two! I'll 'a' pined to death afore two," he cried. "I mun walk, that's all. And tell your missis from me not to kill hersen wi' doin' ower many good works an' kind actions, tell her she owt to look after hersen a bit more, she's wearing hersen away to t'bone." And still chuckling over these ironical thrusts, he turned away and made for the road on the right, a bag in each hand.

There were signs that the day would be warm later on. Already the heavy autumn sunlight was dispersing the light mists, and though there was still a faint chill in the air and a glitter of dew on branch and stem, Mr. Oakroyd stopped shivering after he had gone a dozen yards and very soon found himself quite warm. Not that he felt much better than he had done. His eyes were still weighted with sleeplessness; his unwashed face felt unpleasantly stiff; and he was so empty inside that he discovered that his first pipe of *Old Salt* would have to be postponed until after breakfast, whenever that would be. He walked for a mile down the narrow twisting road without meeting anybody, then, on hearing a light cart come rattling up behind him, he set down his two bags, which were beginning to make his arms ache, and waited at the side of the road.

"Hey!" he cried, when the cart was almost upon him. "You going to Everwell, mate?"

"No, I'm not," said the driver, and passed him without another word or glance.

"That's another o' Big Annie's tribe, I'm thinking, lad," muttered Mr. Oakroyd as he watched the cart disappear round the next corner. He picked up his bags and set off again, not quite so briskly this time.

Another twenty minutes brought him to Capbridge, which consisted

of seven ruinous brick cottages, a few hens, two dirty children, a brown mongrel limping about uneasily, and an actual bridge not quite three yards long. It was at this bridge that Mr. Oakroyd halted again, to rest his arms and to look about him in disgust. Somehow the sight of the place annoyed him. "Daft little hole," he told himself. "I wouldn't ha' a bite o' food given here, I wouldn't." There was an ancient sign-post near the bridge that said: "Everwell 4 mls," and after casting a somewhat melancholy glance at this, he moved on again. "They don't know a mile when they see one round here," he concluded angrily. "I've come three now if I've come a yard, and I'll bet this next fower mile's more like ten."

He had not covered the first of those miles, however, when the luck favoured him at last. He met a cart turning in his direction out of a field and this time he was able to beg a lift, though it took several minutes to explain to the driver, a little old whiskered fellow nearly as deaf as one of his own sacks, exactly what he wanted. And by the time he had made it plain to his companion that he was travelling about, that he wanted a wash and brush-up and some breakfast, Everwell itself was in sight. It was a straggling dingy little place that looked somehow as if it had been dropped there, as if a dozen streets or so from some dreary district in a city had been plucked out and suddenly planted there, and not at all as if it had ever grown.

"Y'oughter go to Poppleby's," quavered the ancient driver. "Poppleby's eatin' place. It's rare and good there, it is."

"Right you are," roared Mr. Oakroyd. "I'll go there. Where is it?"

"Yes, it's the best there is. I goes every Saturday night and has meat-and-'tater pie, every Saturday. I 'as a pint over at Old Crown, then goes for me meat-and-'tater pie."

"I said 'Where is it?'"

"Ay, cheap enough for them as can afford it," said the old man. Then, when they turned the next corner, he pointed with his whip. "Yon's Poppleby's. Yer can get down 'ere." He pulled up.

Mr. Oakroyd descended and collected his luggage. "That'll do me nicely," he cried loudly. "And thanks for the lift."

"Eh?" The old man leaned forward.

"Thanks for the lift." By this time Mr. Oakroyd was hoarse. "I say, thanks for the lift."

"O' course you can, any time," replied the old man mysteriously. He looked at Mr. Oakroyd reproachfully. "I call that a silly question," he said at length, and he drove away, grumbling.

The notice, in large if faded letters, ran: *Good Pull Up. Poppleby's Dining Rooms. Cyclists Catered For.* Mr. Oakroyd regarded it with satisfaction. In the window were some yellow lace curtains, two bottles of lime juice and soda, four withered oranges on a plate, a slab of boldly checkered brawn, labelled *Poppleby's Best,* some little cakes covered with what had once been bright pink icing, and innumerable generations of flies. Mr. Oakroyd did not stop long examining the window, but the sight of it did not lessen his satisfaction. He opened the door and was immediately assailed by the smell of food, which was strong enough to suggest that people had been eating day and night without cessation in that room for the last thirty years. It made Mr. Oakroyd's mouth water. For the last hour and a half he had wanted food, and here, it was plainly evident, was food in plenty. So richly steeped was this dining-room of Poppleby's in the atmosphere of cooking and eating —the oilcloth on the tables was covered with crumbs and the stains of recent meals, the very walls and furnishings were greasy with fat, and the air itself was boiled and toasted and fried—that only to walk into it was to be nourished at once. A person who was not very hungry or not very robust might find a mere entrance sufficient to satisfy or blunt the appetite, but such a hungry and robust person as Mr. Oakroyd could only walk in to discover that he was even hungrier than he imagined, to wait for Mr. Poppleby with a watering mouth.

This is exactly what Mr. Oakroyd did. The room was empty and only the flies were stirring. He sat himself down on one of the benches, coughed and tapped his feet, then finally rapped on his table with a pepper-pot.

"Morning." The man shot up from behind the counter as if he were part of a conjuring trick. It could only be Mr. Poppleby himself. All of him that was visible, his large round face, the top of his long apron, his shirt sleeves and the arms that came out of them, was the same shade

—whitish and faintly greasy. Even his eyes were a pale grey, had a jellied look.

"Morning," said Mr. Oakroyd, still staring. "Er—lemme see—er ——"

"Tea-coffee-cocoa-bacon-and-egg-bacon-and-sausage-kipper-boiled-egg-plate-of-cold-meat-bread-and-butter," said Mr. Poppleby, keeping his prominent eyes fixed on Mr. Oakroyd's with never a blink.

Mr. Oakroyd gazed at him with admiration, then removed his little brown cap, possibly as a tribute. "That sounds a bit of all right. I'll ha' a pot o' tea and you can do me two rashers and two eggs. And plenty o' bread, Mister," he added.

"Pot-of-tea-two-rashers-two-eggs-four-slices-bread." Mr. Poppleby turned away.

"'Ere, I say," cried Mr. Oakroyd. "Can I have a bit of a wash afore I start? Been on t'road most o' t'night—wi' a lorry," and he added this not without a certain touch of pride.

"Certainly you can 'ave a wash, my friend, certainly," replied Mr. Poppleby with impressive gravity. "You just come this way and I'll find you a wash. I'm not saying it's usual—it isn't usual—but it's no worse for that, is it? You don't want to sit down to your food all dirty, an' I don't want to see you sitting down to it all dirty, and we're too feller men, aren't we? That's right, isn't it? Well, you come this way then." And off he went, with Mr. Oakroyd in attendance. They arrived at a tiny scullery, and Mr. Poppleby waved a hand to indicate the presence of a little enamel bowl, a large bar of yellow soap, and a towel that had seen long and desperate service. "'Ere you are, my friend," he continued. "You can wash 'ere to your 'eart's content. And while you're 'aving your wash, we'll be dishing up your bacon and your eggs. That's fair dealing between man and man, isn't it? Give a man what he asks for—in reason, y'know, for there's reason in everything—but anyhow, *try* to give a man what 'e asks for—that's my motto." And thus concluding, a trifle unctuously, Mr. Poppleby withdrew.

"Who does he think he is—Lloyd George?" muttered Mr. Oakroyd as he took off his coat. He saw that the envelope was still safely stowed away in the breast pocket. "To hear him talk, you'd think he was offering me a steam bath wi' shampoos an' finger-nail cutting to foller." Nevertheless, when he had spluttered over the enamel bowl and had

rubbed himself hard with the only corner of the towel that was not slippery, he felt twice the man he had been, and when he returned to the dining-room, passing on his way through a zone newly enriched by the smell of frying bacon, he gazed benevolently at the impressive figure of Mr. Poppleby, who was engaged in depositing a pot of tea beside a plate of bread, a cup and saucer, a long pointed knife and a two-pronged fork.

"Your bacon and your eggs'll be ready in one minute," said Mr. Poppleby, returning to his counter.

"Good enough," cried Mr. Oakroyd, rubbing his hands. "I'm fair pining, I can tell you."

"We'll soon put that right." And no consulting surgeon could have said this more impressively. "So you've been on the road, eh?"

"I have an' all," said Mr. Oakroyd. "Come down t'Great North Road last night." But, somewhat to his surprise, this did not appear to impress his host.

"Well, what I say is this," Mr. Poppleby began even more weightily than before. "It's all right if you take it all in the right way. What I mean is, if it makes you more yuman, it's all right. If it doesn't it's all wrong. If I've said it once to customers 'ere, I've said it a thousand times, just standing 'ere like I am now, talking to somebody like yourself. 'Does it,' I said, 'make you more yuman? 'Cos if it doesn't, keep it.' I take a broad view, and when I say yuman, I mean yuman. I believe——" and here he fixed his prominent eyes unwinkingly upon Mr. Oakroyd—"in yumanity."

"That's right, mister," replied Mr. Oakroyd heartily but with a certain philosophical sternness. "I see your point and I'm with yer." He would have been better pleased, however, he admitted to himself, to have seen the bacon and eggs. A knocking from some place behind suggested that they were now ready.

"What I say is, ask yourself all the time 'Is it yuman?' If it isn't, don't touch it. Let it alone. Pass it by. That's my motto—yumanity first—and that's the rule 'ere, as you saw right off when you asked for a wash. Take the yuman line, I say, and it'll pay you every time." He now condescended to hear the knocking, and brought out the bacon and eggs. "There you are, my friend," he said, and he said it in such

a manner that it was impossible to believe that he had merely carried the dish a few yards. He seemed not only to have done the cooking but to have gathered the eggs from distant roosts, to have cured the bacon himself, to have made the very crockery.

Mr. Oakroyd, after telling himself that he wished the cooking had been done by some one a little less human (for the eggs were fried hard), ate away with the utmost heartiness and despatch. Every mouthful seemed to be taken in under the auspices of Mr. Poppleby, who leaned over the counter and never took his eyes off his solitary customer. By the time he had arrived at his third slice of bread, Mr. Oakroyd was ready to open the conversation again. He felt friendly, expansive.

"What allus beats me," he announced, "is this here 'Cyclists Catered For.' What's difference between cyclists and t'other folk as comes?"

"'Am chiefly," replied Mr. Poppleby thoughtfully. "Cyclists is great on 'am. I've seen the day when one of these cycling clubs would run me right out of 'am by six o'clock Saturday. Mind you, I'm not talking about last week, nor the week before, nor last year, nor the year before that, I'm talking about before the War. Properly speaking, there's no cyclists now, not to call cyclists. You might get one now and again, coming on a byke, but there's no real cycling, couples off together, and clubs, and suchlike. That's gone, that'll never come back. When I started 'ere, it was all traps and carts and what not on week day, and then cyclists—with a few regular locals coming in, of course—at week-ends. Now it's all cars and lorries. And what 'appens? They don't stop at a place like this but goes on to big towns and stops there. That's what's hit this business so 'ard, my friend. It isn't what it was, I can tell you."

"Nowt's what it wor," said Mr. Oakroyd with a kind of cheerful melancholy. "I've seen some changes i' my time. You take textile trade nar——"

But Mr. Poppleby was not taking it. "That is so. And what's it amount to, what's the real difference between them times and these? That's the question I always ask."

"And you're quite right, mate, to ask it," Mr. Oakroyd put in warmly.

"And what's the answer? What's the answer?" And Mr. Poppleby hurried on so that he could supply it himself. "It's less yuman, that's the

difference." And he paused, triumphantly, gazing at Mr. Oakroyd, who was busy lighting the pipe for which he had long been waiting. Secure on a foundation of bacon and eggs, *Old Salt* was again delicious. Mr. Oakroyd slowly sent a few of its kindly blue clouds rolling through the air, and waited for Mr. Poppleby to continue.

"I've no need to tell a man like you what I mean by 'yuman,'" Mr. Poppleby went on. "I mean there's less of the good old man-to-man spirit. It's take what you can get and run, nowadays. Money and grab and rush, that's what it is. When you're running a business like this, you see life, you know what's 'appening in the world, you talk to all sorts. Of course there's some men in the catering that's as ignorant as you like—and why?—'cos they don't make use of the hopportunities of the business; they see a customer come in, gets 'is order, serves it, takes the money, and finish. I like to live and learn. I talk to my customers and they talk to me, and that's 'ow I go on. I'm learning from you."

"Ay," said Mr. Oakroyd, who could not help wondering, however, what it was that the other was learning from him. "He doesn't gi' me a chance to tell him owt," he told himself, and, feeling that he had had enough of Mr. Poppleby's conversation, he said, "Well, what's t'damage?"

"Lemme see," replied Mr. Poppleby. "Pot-of-tea-two-rashers-two-eggs-four-slices-bread. That'll be one and eight. *And* a fair price if you ask me."

"Ay, I dare say," said Mr. Oakroyd, who thought it stiffish. He felt in his pockets and once again produced the solitary six-pence. "I shall ha' to ask you to do a bit o' changing for me," he remarked, producing the envelope from his breast pocket.

"We'll try to manage that." Mr. Poppleby made a noise that faintly suggested he was laughing. "You want the change and I want you to 'ave it, and we're both satisfied and nobody's the worse. That's the yuman line, isn't it?"

But Mr. Oakroyd was staring in front of him open-mouthed. The envelope was not empty, but all that it contained was a dirty half-sheet of paper on which was scrawled "Wishing you a Merry Xmas & a Happy New Year. XXX." All four banknotes had disappeared. He

ran through all his pockets, hoping against hope that somebody had merely played a trick upon him. But no, they had gone. He had been robbed. And now he understood why he had been given the sofa to sleep on last night, why Nobby and Fred had departed so early, why the landlady had hustled him out of the place before he had time to think.

" 'Ere," he cried, "I've been robbed. Look at this. I'd twenty pound i' there last night, fower five-pound notes, and sitha, there's nowt there but a bit o' paper. I've been robbed and I know who did it." But when he looked at Mr. Poppleby, he saw that that gentleman was regarding him coldly, with raised eyebrows.

"It'll be one and eight," repeated Mr. Poppleby.

This made Mr. Oakroyd very angry. "I tell you I've been robbed o' twenty pound. I haven't one and eight. I've got sixpence, and there it is, and that's all I have got. And I know who did it and where it happened, too. It were two fellers wi' a lorry at t'Kirkworth Inn last night."

"Are you trying to tell me you lost twenty pound, four five-pound notes, at the Kirkworth Inn last night?" demanded Mr. Poppleby. "Because if you are, I'm going to ask you what you was doing with so many five-pound notes and at such a place. It sounds fishy to me. But that's no business of mine; you go your way and I'll go mine—though the sooner you get back to where you come from, the better, I think, my friend; but in the meantime you owe me one shilling and eightpence, whichever way you look at it. And that's what I want from you —one and eight."

"And that's what you can't get from me, Mister," cried Mr. Oakroyd, exasperated. "Aren't I telling you that I've nobbut sixpence in t'world? 'Ere, look 'ere." And, rising to his feet, he turned out his trousers pockets. "Twenty pounds I've lost, all I'd got but this here sixpence. Eh, but I was a gert blunder-heead!"

"You're not the first that's tried it on," said Mr. Poppleby, steadily.

"Ar d'you mean?" cried Mr. Oakroyd. "I'm not trying anything on. When I come in here, I thought I'd twenty pound i' my pocket. I didn't know I'd been robbed."

"And I didn't know, neither," observed the other, eyeing him suspiciously. "This has happened before 'ere, I'll tell you. And I go on trusting people. You come in 'ere and you 'ave my eggs and my bacon and my tea——"

"Ay, and your bread and your lump o' washing soap and your mucky towel and your drop o' water," Mr. Oakroyd added with great bitterness. "Go on, go on. You've lost one and eight and I've lost twenty pound, and it's bad luck for both on us, but it's a dam' sight war for me. 'Ere, there's sixpence, and that knocks it down to one and two. Well, I'll settle wi' thee, lad." And Mr. Oakroyd, in a frenzy of irritation, rushed to his bag of tools and took out a chisel. "You see that chisel? It's worth more ner any one and two, is that, and you can ha' that for your one and two. And when I can pay your fowerteen pence, I will, for I'd rather ha' that chisel than all t'shop you've got. Ay, even if you cleaned it up," he added vindictively.

Mr. Poppleby came forward, picked up the sixpence and examined the chisel. "A chisel's no good to me," he said slowly, "but I suppose I'd better let you go. I like to take a yuman line——"

"Yuman line! T-t-t-t. Yuman nothing!" Mr. Oakroyd was very scornful as he gathered his things together.

"That'll do, that'll do." Mr. Poppleby's philosophical vanity was hurt now. "But let me tell you, my friend, you can't do these sort o' things 'ere. Don't try it again. I tell you, you can't do it."

"And let me tell you summat, Mister," said Mr. Oakroyd, moving to the door. "There's summat you can't do, neither."

"Ho, indeed! And what's that?"

"You can't fry eggs." And Mr. Oakroyd, chuckling, closed the door behind him.

Down the sunny length of Everwell he wandered, a man desperately situated. He had not a penny, was far from home and, indeed, not certain where he was, had no work at a time when work was scarce, and had not even an insurance card. Yet before he reached the southern end of the town he was chuckling again.

"I had him nicely about them eggs." And he lifted to the sun a face still wrinkled and brightened by the pleasures of repartee.

III

It was late in the afternoon when Mr. Oakroyd saw the curious motor van. Since leaving Poppleby's Dining Rooms, he had struggled down some eight or nine miles of dusty road, forever changing his basket trunk from the right hand to the left and his bag of tools from the left hand to the right, he had had a bite of bread and cheese and a mouthful of beer from a friendly lorry driver, who had not, however, believed a word that Mr. Oakroyd had told him, and he had slept for two hours under a hedge. Now he was moving on again, very slowly because, for one thing, he was tired and rather dazed after his nap, and, for another thing, he did not know where he was going and was wondering what to do. The motor van caught his eye at once. It was drawn up under some trees just off the road, and was a most unusual vehicle, something between a rather long delivery van and a caravan proper. A little window had been let into the side, but it had no chimney nor any of the shining contrivances of the real caravan. Paint and polish it had none; the car itself seemed old and rusty; and the wagon or caravan part of it had a woefully weatherbeaten look. After noticing all these details with a craftsman's eye, Mr. Oakroyd might have passed on had he not heard, from the back of the van, the sound of sawing, a sound that made him prick up his ears at once. And it took him not more than a minute to arrive at a certain conclusion.

"Yond chap can't handle a saw," he announced to himself, and walked across to investigate, emboldened by his plight and the knowledge that he, Jess Oakroyd, could handle a saw. Once at the back of the van, he dropped his bags, lit his pipe, stuck his hands in his pockets, and thus fell easily into his rôle of spectator.

The man with the saw looked up as Mr. Oakroyd approached and then dubiously set to work again. He was a thick-set fellow in his early forties, with black hair cropped close, eyes almost as black as his hair, and a broad clean-shaven face almost as red as the scarf he wore in place of collar and tie. Though he was in his shirt sleeves and his brown check suit was shabby, he looked far more dashing and dressy than Mr. Oakroyd or any of Mr. Oakroyd's friends. Nevertheless, his appearance did not clash at all with that of the van. There was about him an air

of vagabondage that Mr. Oakroyd recognised at once, though he could not have put a name to it. Without obviously being anything definite himself, the man yet called to mind strolling actors and soldiers and sparring partners and racing touts and cheap auctioneers.

He looked up again after Mr. Oakroyd had been standing there a minute or two. "Nice day, George," he remarked with a wink.

"Ay," said Mr. Oakroyd; and then, not to be outdone in this matter of handing out names, he added, drily: "Nice enough, Herbert."

"'Ere," said the man, straightening himself, "now I ask you. Do I look like Herbert?"

"Nay, I don't know." Mr. Oakroyd paused a moment. "But I'll tell you what you *don't* look like, if you ask me."

"Go on, George. I'll buy it."

"You don't look like a chap as knows how to use a saw," replied Mr. Oakroyd, softening the severity of this criticism with a companionable grin.

"Oh? Now we're 'earing something, aren't we?" He dove into his waistcoat pocket, fished out a packet of Woodbines and a box of matches, and lit up. "Do you know all about saws, George?" he enquired amiably.

Mr. Oakroyd's reply to this was to fetch his bag of tools and dump it down at the other's feet. "You tell me what you're trying to do, mate," he said earnestly, "and I'll soon show you what I know about saws."

"'Ello, 'ello!" the man cried in mock astonishment. "What's the ruddy idear? You a tradesman, George?"

"I am an' all," replied Mr. Oakroyd, not without pride. "I'm a joiner and carpenter by trade."

"Well, I'll tell you something now. My turn, see. You don't come from round 'ere. You come from Leeds."

"Nay, I don't. I come from Bruddersford." And this seemed to Mr. Oakroyd a different thing altogether from coming from Leeds, and so he was triumphant.

"Near enough," said the other complacently. "Knew you came from that way. Tell it in a minute. Bruddersford, eh? Know Lane End Fair?"

"Tide, you mean."

"That's right. Lane End Tide. All 'tides' round there, aren't they? Don't call 'em fairs."

"Course I know it," said Mr. Oakroyd.

"So do I," exclaimed the man in triumph. "Been there many a time. I gave it a miss this year but was there last year. What are you doing round 'ere? Looking for a job?"

"Ay, I'm looking for a job nar," said Mr. Oakroyd bitterly. "I'll ha' to get one right sharp, too. I've been landed properly, I have." And the next minute he was telling the story of his lost twenty pounds. It was the third time he had told it that day, but it was the first time he had found a listener who believed him.

"Where did you get the fivers from?" asked the other, at the end of the story. "Back a winner?"

"Nay, I never put owt on horses. But another chap had backed a lot o' winners seemingly." And, encouraged by the reception of his previous recital, he now told the story of the drunken sportsman and his bulging pocket-book, to all of which his companion, now sitting on the steps of his van, listened with a quick and humourous sympathy.

"Easy come, easy go, that," he observed. Then he reflected. "What did you say the name of that feller was, the one with the lorry? Nobby Clarke? I've known a few Nobby Clarkes in my time. One or two'ud have taken the milk out of your tea. Was he a little feller with a turned-up nose, Cockney twang, bit of a boxing man, lightweight?"

"Nay, this chap was a big fat feller wi' a big round bilberry face on him the size o' two," said Mr. Oakroyd. "A smooth-talking chap, he wore, though I thought he were a bit of a rogue as soon as I clapped eyes on him."

"I believe I know that feller. Nobby Clarke. Nobby Clarke? A feller like that used to go round with Mason's *Magic and Mysteries,* and 'e might have called 'imself Nobby Clarke. I shall remember 'im. If I saw 'im myself I should know in a minute. Never forget a dial. I meet a feller and say ' 'Ello, saw you at so-and-so five years ago, six years, seven years, ten years ago,' whatever it is; and 'e says 'That's right. I was there. Don't remember you'; and I says 'No, but I remember you.' I'm right every time. Marvellous, isn't it?"

"And so you're one o' these as goes wi' t'tides—fairs—like?"

"That's me! My name's Jackson. What's yours?"

"Oakroyd. Jess Oakroyd."

"Oakroyd. Good enough! Well, mine's Jackson—Joby they call me—Joby Jackson. Everybody in this line o' business knows me. Been in it twenty years, and been in it longer only I started in the old militia and then joined up again in the War. Done everything—you ask anybody—Joby Jackson. Boxing shows, circus, try-your-luck games, everything. I've run shows of me own—Human Spider and Wild Man o' the Amazon. You can't name a place where they 'ave a fair or a race-meeting I 'aven't been to, you can't do it. I know 'em all. England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Isle o' Man, Isle o' Wight, you can't lose me. Marvellous!" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the van. "On a steady line now. I'm selling 'em something. Got ter do it—isn't enough money about for the old games—you've got to sell 'em something now. Rubber toys is my line, rubber dolls, rubber animals—you blow 'em up"—and here he blew away, for he was a man who illustrated his talk with innumerable rapid and vivid gestures—"and there y'are. Seen 'em? Good line—plenty o' profit—easy to carry—all flat, you see, light as a feather. Get a good day and they sell like beer in barracks. Some days you can't sell anything—you wouldn't get buyers if you were offering bottles o' Scotch at ninepence a time. But get a good day ——" and after a little overture of winking, he unloaded in rapid dumb show a host of invisible rubber dolls and animals upon an invisible multitude—"marvellous. Only thing is, too much competition! They're all tumbling to it, all coming in now. When a few more gets in, I shall get out, see? I'll try something else, sell 'em something new. That's the idear, isn't it, George?"

"And you go round i' this?" Mr. Oakroyd looked at the van.

"That's it," replied Joby, with enthusiasm. "Take a decco at 'er. Not exactly a ruddy Rolls-Royce, but she moves, George, she moves. You can't get more than twenty miles an hour out of 'er, 'cept down steep 'ills, but that's enough, what d'you say? Got 'er for fifteen quid—a gift; then 'ad a winder put in, then a bunk, then a couple o' bunks. If I don't want to sleep anywhere else, I sleep in there, see? I'm sleeping in there tonight. Got a little stove in there, carry all my stock in it, stall and all. 'Ere, I was trying to patch up the old stall when you come

'ere. It got a nasty knock yesterday. Like to see what you could do with it? I'm no good with my 'ands. Funny thing, isn't it? I can sell anything, do the patter, but can't use my 'ands; must 'ave been born a ruddy gentleman. Like to 'ave a do at the old stall, George? I'll see you're all right."

"Leave it to me, mate," cried Mr. Oakroyd, delighted. "Let's have a look at t'rest of it. Got any nuts and bolts and three-inch nails?" Together they pulled out from the floor of the van the remaining pieces of woodwork, and Joby discovered that he had some spare nuts and bolts and plenty of long nails. "Nar then," said Mr. Oakroyd, "you tell me what you want and I'll set you up i' no time." And in another minute he had his bag of tools open and his coat off and was happily at work.

"'Ow about a drop o' Rosie Lee?" said Mr. Joby Jackson. He was very fond of this queer rhyming slang, most of which must be omitted from any record of his talk because it is incomprehensible to ordinary people. Even Mr. Oakroyd, who was acquainted with this kind of slang, though he rarely used it himself and, indeed, associated it with rather disreputable characters, was sometimes puzzled. But he was not bewildered, of course, by any mention of the famous Rosie, and he was more than ready for a drink of tea. So Joby strolled away to fill the kettle, returned with it to busy himself in the van, and then came out again to sit on the steps and watch Mr. Oakroyd at work.

"Fond o' tarts, George?" he enquired.

"Nay, I've had all t'tarts I want," Mr. Oakroyd grunted in reply, still bending over his saw. He quite understood that the question did not refer to things to eat.

"Tarts or booze—or both," said Joby reflectively, "that's where the bother begins. You wouldn't be 'aving to mend that stall now if it 'adn't been for a tart. I've 'ad a pal with me lately—Tommy Muss they call 'im. Silly name, isn't it? Clever little feller, though, Tommy. I've known 'im years. 'E used to go round with Oxley's Circus, one time, then 'e ran a little ball-on-a-string game—one o' them where you gets a watch, that is if you're lucky and the feller that's running the game don't 'appen to lean on the board when you're 'aving your go, see—but 'e wasn't good at it, wasn't Tommy. So 'e come round with me. You can manage by yourself at this, but it's better with two. Booze

isn't Tommy's trouble, though he can shift it as well as the next. It's tarts. Can't keep away from the women, and they can't keep away from 'im. Good-lookin' little feller, Tommy, an' got a bit o' ruddy swank, yer know—and they like it, George, they like it. And 'e's the best mouth-organ player you ever 'eard in all your natural, easy the best—never 'eard anybody to touch Tommy with a mouth-organ—play anything—marvellous! There was a piece about 'im once in *The World's Fair*. 'E oughter 'ave gone on the stage as a mouth-organ turn. I've told 'im so many a time. 'E's a mug. 'E could 'ave been getting twenty quid a week. 'E wouldn't bother, though, too busy square-pushing, taking the girls out, see. Well, anyhow, there's a tart 'e's 'ad 'is eye on some time—black flashing sort o' bit she is—and 'er and another woman runs one of these palmistry Gipsy Queen stunts, see. We kept coming across 'em—working the same fairs,—and I saw Tommy was working 'is points. 'Alf a minute, we'll 'ave the Rosie now, George."

Joby mashed the tea in a mess-tin, stirred some sweet condensed milk into it, then poured his companion's share of the rich brew into a large thick cup, across which was written *Moseley's Coffee Taverns Ltd.*, and retained the mess-tin for his own use. He also brought out of the van a biscuit tin containing two-thirds of a loaf of bread and some butter.

"'Ow's this, George?"

"Grand!" replied Mr. Oakroyd, munching away. He looked about him and would have sighed with pleasure if he had not been so busy eating. Everything was still and the sky was a fine blaze of gold. The tea was exactly the strong and sweet mixture he preferred, and not for years had he enjoyed a slice or two of bread and butter as much as he was doing now. "I'll make a right job o' this stall," he told himself, turning a grateful glance upon his host. And after a few puffs of *Old Salt*, he announced, "I'll get on wi' t'job nar," and returned happily to work.

"You were saying summat about yer pal and this here Gipsy Queen lass," he said, when Joby had cleared away the things and was sitting down again on the steps.

"Lemme see," reflected Joby. "Oh yes—about that bit o' bother we 'ad yesterday. Well, you see, yesterday we're at a little place called Brodley, thirty or forty mile away, where there's a bit of a fair. This

tart's there and Tommy's square-pushing 'er as 'ard as 'e can go, see. 'E's the sheek of Araby there all right. But this tart 'ad been going round with a feller called Jim Summers. This feller's tried all sorts and just now 'e's running one o' these try-your-strength things—yer know what I mean—down with the 'ammer and up she goes and rings the bell—no good now, played out. 'E's a big feller—fourteen stone easy—and used to be a bit of a fighting-man—a slogger, you know, trained on booze. Well, this tart 'ad been going round with this feller, Jim Summers, and then she'd given 'im the go-by, see. You know what they are, and I expect 'e'd taken too many loads on and knocked 'er about a bit. But if 'e couldn't 'ave 'er, nobody else would, neither—that was 'is line, and 'e's a big feller, gilled arf the time and with a nasty temper. Tommy gets away with it with this tart yesterday properly, and Jim Summers is on the same ground and 'ears about it, comes lookin' for 'em. This tart and the other Gipsy Queen—a fattish woman, comes from Burnley—'ad packed up 'cos there wasn't much doin' anyhow. Tommy comes round the back of the stall. ''Ere,' 'e says, 'I'm off with this tart for a day or two, and I'm off now. I don't want any bother with a mad-drunk 'eavyweight like Summers. Join yer later on, Joby,' 'e says. 'Right you are, Tommy,' I says. I knew 'e knew what the programme was, see. Nottingham Goose Fair starts a week this Thursday. Ever been? Marvellous! It's one of my best pitches, and I'm getting a fresh lot of stock in for it, pickin' it up at Nottingham before the fair starts. So I'm just working a lot of little places, filling time in, like, not too far away. We 'ad it all worked out—me and Tommy, always do, yer know—so that 'e knew the programme, and I knew 'e'd join me soon as 'e could, might be tomorrow, might be next week. This tart might be working the same places, and if she wasn't, 'e'd see 'er at the Goose Fair. So off 'e went, and where they went to I don't know, so I can't tell you. It didn't bother me. I didn't want to foller 'em in their Abode of Love. But I knew what was coming to me—Jim Summers. Up he comes, just after Tommy'd gone. 'E'd been in the boozer at dinner-time and 'e was nasty, very nasty. ''Ere,' 'e says, giving the old stall a bang or two, 'where's that um-pum-pum-bloody-um-pum-pum little pal o' yours?' 'Strewth, you ought to 'ave 'eard 'im. Top of 'is voice, too. 'Don't ask me,' I says—and I don't

mind telling you, George, I was wishing I was a long way off, though I can use 'em a bit. 'You know,' 'e says, 'and you're going to bloody well tell me or this something-something stall o' yours goes up in the air.' And 'e begins kicking about a bit, see. ''Ere,' I says, 'you leave that alone.' But 'ow's the repairs going, George?" He stood up and began to inspect the other's handiwork.

"You tak' hold o' that end," said Mr. Oakroyd, now in command. "We'd better fix her up and see how she stands. Steady, mate, steady! Nar then, drop it in."

They spent the next half hour rigging up the stall, Mr. Oakroyd making certain improvements at the owner's suggestion. When no more could be done—Joby declaring that it was now better than ever—they took it down and packed it away in the van, well content.

"I passed a boozer about two miles down this road," said Joby. "What about 'aving a can or two?"

This brought Mr. Oakroyd out of his pleasant dream of craftsmanship, and he was troubled. "I could do one," he said dubiously, "but I have nowt. I'd better be thinking what to do wi' mysen."

"That's all right, George. You're with me, see. 'Ere, you're not doing anything, are yer? Well, you stay with me till Tommy comes rolling 'ome again—might be a day, might be two days, might be a week. You'll 'ave somewhere to sleep, your grub, and I'll see you've something to be going on with when 'e does come back. I'm going to a little place called Ribsden tomorrer—got a weekly market and there's a bit of a fair on—and you can give me a 'and, see? What say?"

"You're not doing this because I have nowt, are yer?" demanded Mr. Oakroyd severely, his independence up in arms. "I don't want—what's it?—charity, you know."

"Charity nothing!" cried Joby. "Oo d'yer think I am? Lord Lonsdale? I want yer to give me a 'and, see. Besides, you've done me one good turn already. Can't I do you one?"

"You can an' all," said Mr. Oakroyd. "I'll be right glad to stop till your mate comes back."

"Put it there if it weighs a ton," cried Joby. And they shook hands. "Is everything in? 'Ere, shove your tools in the van. And put that in

as well. Is that yer luggage? Looks like four days at Sunny Southport, that does. 'Strewth, I 'aven't seen one o' them things for years. Get in. We'll run 'er down to the boozer—too far to walk. Now then, Liz, let's give a turn to the old 'andle. She's startin', she's startin'. No, she's not. Now then, Liz, what about it? There she goes. J'ever 'ear such an engine? Sounds like one o' them electric pianners startin'. She 'asn't 'ad any oil in 'er since I left Doncaster. Now then, 'old tight, George, we're off."

"What happened wi' this chap you were talking about, this chap Summers?" shouted Mr. Oakroyd as they went rattling down the road.

"A bobby come round just when the bother began," replied Joby. "And Summers slung 'is 'ook. I packed up just after that and come down 'ere. Where 'e went to I don't know. I'm wondering what 'is programme is. Sure to see 'im at Nottingham, but 'e'll 'ave got over it by then."

"Ay, let's hope so," said Mr. Oakroyd, who found that he too kept wondering what the movements of this Summers might be. He could only hope that this chap had never heard of the place they were going to tomorrow, Ribsden. He had never heard of it himself before. After a little while he remarked casually: "I suppose you chaps is allus coming across each other, aren't you?"

"You bet yer life!" replied Joby heartily. "Can't go anywhere without seeing some o' the boys. Same old crowd, same old round, year after year. Marvellous!"

"Ay, I suppse so," said Mr. Oakroyd thoughtfully, and began to think about other things.

They had two pints each at the little public-house, and Joby was the success of the evening there. In less than ten minutes the taproom was his kingdom. His talk became more and more staccato and yet more dramatic; he showered winks and nudges upon his companions; he showed them how Bermondsey Jack went down to a foul from the nigger, how Dixie Jones got in with his left, how his old friend, Joe Clapham—"best welterweight we ever 'ad—but a mug, see—fight anybody—do it for nothing"—had two years of glory, laying 'em all out, going through the lot "like a dose o' salts"; he took them through fairs

and boxing booths and race-meetings and pubs from Penzance to Aberdeen, and told them about three-card men and quack doctors and bookies and 'tecs; and the later it grew the more often his "Marvellous!" rang through the admiring taproom. Even the landlord was impressed and insisted upon standing him a farewell pint. As for Mr. Oakroyd, he wandered through an enchanted country. Being a respectable Bruddersford workingman, he had no desire to be one of these people or to pass his life in their world. But to hear about them and it, perhaps to meet some of these people, to dive into this fascinating world, this was enchantment. He drank his beer, pulled away at his *Old Salt,* and sat there, never missing a word or a gesture, dazed and happy. And when they drove back to the convenient harbourage at the side of the road, the talk still went on, and by the time they were settling down in the van, taking off their boots and coats and then stretching out on the bunks and rolling in a blanket each, they had arrived at football and a common enthusiasm, so that it was very late indeed before Mr. Oakroyd said "t'United" for the last time and Joby Jackson had no more fullbacks and centre forwards to bring out for his inspection. A grand night.

They were silent. The queer little noises of the night crept into the dark van. Mr. Oakroyd listened to the strange rustling and scratching for several minutes, and was then startled by a sudden melancholy screech. "Eh, that's a funny noise, isn't it? It gives you the creeps."

"Owl," explained Joby. "I don't mind it—used to it. Tell you what I can't stand. Trams. 'Orrible sound at night, trams. If I'm in a place where there's trams, I never go to bed till they've stopped. Can't get to sleep for 'em—gives me the 'eart-ache or the stomach-ache. Ah, well," he added drowsily, "not a bad life this, not while yer can stand up and chew your grub. Keep going and see a bit o' life, I say, we'll all be dead soon enough. What say, George?"

"There's summat i' that," replied Mr. Oakroyd, with true Bruddersfordian caution. But in truth he was really still a little dazed by the wonder of it all. "I maun tell our Lily about this chap," he reflected. "She'll be right amused." And there was a moment, in the shadows of sleep, when he caught her smiling at him across the wastes.

IV

The next morning they were up and away very early. "Take us an hour to get there," Joby explained. "And I want a good pitch." They made a quick breakfast, tea and bread and boiled ham, and were bumping down the road before the sun had struggled through the clouds.

"Bit colder than it wor," said Mr. Oakroyd.

Joby gave the morning an expert glance. "Weather's breaking. Won't be so warm today, you'll see. Might rain. If it doesn't today, it will tomorrer. Rain's no good to us. A couple o' weeks of it and yer see me going to the nearest three brass balls, selling the little 'ome up. Talk about sailors! We're the blokes that 'ave to watch the weather."

Ribsden, a squat little town not unlike Everwell, but rather larger, was already in a bustle when they arrived. The combined fair and market filled the square and was creeping up several streets leading into it. Joby secured a pitch that pleased him, however, for it was just at the junction of the main street and the square and—as he pointed out at once—"dead opposite a boozer"—*The Helping Hand.* They were not able to keep the van with them, but had to take out everything they wanted, stall and stock, and then park it up a side-street in a line of other cars and carts and caravans. Together they set up the stall and began decorating it with rubber dolls and animals, most of which had to be inflated. From time to time, Joby would give a shout, recognizing some acquaintance, but everybody was too busy to talk, except the onlookers, the local crowd, which was made up of little boys who were so interested that they got in the way and had to be cursed out of it again, little girls who jumped up and down on the pavement in an ecstasy of anticipation, a policeman with a ginger moustache who apparently did not like markets and fairs, and a policeman without a moustache who apparently did like them. Mr. Oakroyd enjoyed every minute of it. He enjoyed the bustle and hammering and shouting, the setting up and decoration of the stall, upon which he now turned a proud parental eye, the autumn snap in the air and the first gleams of sunlight, the now thoroughly adventurous flavour of *Old Salt,* and the companionship of the knowing and voluble Joby. He did not see himself as a salesman of rubber dolls, though he soon became expert in

blowing them up and setting them out; but, taking it all in all, it was—as he admitted to himself more than once—"a champion do."

Joby completed his preparations for the day by tacking a number of little placards to the posts of the stall: "Don't forget the Little Ones," they screamed at the passer-by. "Shops Can't Compete"; "We lead. Others follow"; "British Workmanship Can't Be Beat"—which was probably true enough and worth saying, even though all Mr. Jackson's stock seemed to come out of boxes bearing foreign labels. To crown all, in the centre of the cross-bar at the top was a larger placard, glorious in scarlet, announcing that "Joby Jackson is Here Again. The Old Firm." Having done this and surveyed his handiwork with great satisfaction, Joby had leisure to turn his attention to his neighbours.

One of them had just arrived to claim a little space on the left, dumping into it an easel and a box. He was a tall seedy man dressed in a frock coat that shone in the sun and looked greenish in the shade. He wore no hat, and had a grey mop of hair at the back of his head but none at all in front. His eyebrows were so large and so black that they did away with the necessity of closely shaving the face below them, a fact of which their owner had recently taken a generous advantage.

"Morning, Perfesser," said Joby to this personage.

"Good morning," said the Professor, who had a hollow booming voice. "Ah, it's Mr. Jackson. Good morning. Neighbours again, eh? I think I saw you at Doncaster."

"You did. Got a good stand 'ere." And Joby jerked a thumb at *The Helping Hand.*

"Ah yes. I'd never noticed that. Well, it might be useful, Mr. Jackson. I've known the time when——" And he completed the sentence by raising a large dirty hand towards his mouth, which brought from its cavernous depths a sound suggesting laughter. Then he looked very grave. "Nothing much for me here today, Mr. Jackson. A mere stop-gap, nothing more."

"Same 'ere," said Joby. "Where you been since Doncaster, Perfesser?"

"Places without a name, you might say," the Professor boomed mournfully. "Little markets, miserable affairs, pounds of cheese and yards of muslin and ducks and hens. Rural solitudes, Mr. Jackson. And I

was carrying the wrong line too. If I'd been running the rheumatic cure or the digestive tonic, all might have been well, but at the present time I'm doing the Character and Destiny business and it's a town business, absolutely a town business. I thought of changing over but there wasn't time to get the bottles. And you must have bottles nowadays, must have bottles. They won't swallow the pills, Mr. Jackson. That's not bad, eh? Just keep an eye on that box, will you? I'll be back in about ten minutes." And the Professor strode away.

"Yond chap'ud make a good loud speaker," said Mr. Oakroyd, who had been listening with delight to this dialogue.

"That's what 'e is, if you ask me," replied Joby. "Clever feller, though, the Perfesser. Known 'im off and on years. All patter, y'know. Marvellous! 'E'd sell 'em anything. No expenses, all profit, in 'is line. Clever feller. Edjucated, y'know—that's what does it. They wouldn't believe you and me if we tried it on the same as 'e does. 'E'd make 'em believe anything, sell 'em the boots off their feet."

"Ay, I dare say," Mr. Oakroyd observed thoughtfully. "But he hasn't got fat on it."

"Too much booze—lives on it—telegraphic address: Blotting Paper. 'Sides, the game's not what it was, and that's a fact. Too much edjucation about for fellers like 'im. They're beginning to rumble 'im." Then he changed his tone, so suddenly that he startled Mr. Oakroyd. "Nar then, lady, take yer choice. Ninepence, one shilling, one-and-six, two shillings, all guaranteed not to burst, tear, burn, or drown, the best rubber on the market today. Pick where yer like, they're all the best." It looked as if their first customer had arrived.

There was now a steady flow of folk round the stalls, from which issued startling brazen voices. So far the crowd was chiefly composed of women with baskets; the pleasure-seekers would come later; but for those who, like Joby, catered for the family, the day's trade had begun. Mr. Oakroyd, hanging about at the back of the stall, discovered a new interest in life. He had never helped to sell anything before, and now it seemed to him an amusing gamble. Would the little boy with *H.M.S. Lion* on his hat succeed in dragging his mother over to see the rubber animals? Would the woman with the carpet bag, who talked incessantly to her companion and turned over dolls and animals without

ever looking at them, end by buying anything or was she merely there to have her talk out in peace? Joby seemed to know, as a rule, and some people he left entirely alone, some he took gently into his confidence in the matter of rubber toys, and others he bullied outright into buying. Mr. Oakroyd, trying to be helpful but not finding much to do, regarded his new friend with admiration.

"Got the idear, George?" said Joby, looking straight in front of him but twisting his mouth round and winking very rapidly, a method of address that suggested unfathomable confidences. "Take note o' the patter and prices, see. Might want yer to take on a bit soon."

A minute or two later it would have been almost impossible to hear this message because their neighbour on the right suddenly opened the day's campaign. Even when he began, this linoleum merchant, he was coatless, perspiring, in a fury of salesmanship, and every moment he became more tempestuous, banging his rolls of linoleum, his little table, his own hand, anything and everything, and worked himself into such a frenzy that it made you hot to see him, made your throat ache to listen to him, and turned the purchase of a roll of linoleum into an act of common kindness. "Now I'll tell yer whattam going ter do, people," he would yell. "Just to make a start, I'm not going ter sell yer linoleum, I'm going ter give it ter yer. Here y'are." And he would unroll a length and bang away at it in a passion. "Now that's not oilcloth, it's the very best lino-carpet pattern, rubber-backed—and there's four yards if there's an inch and yer couldn't buy it under fifteen shillings in any shop in this town or any other town." Here he would draw a deep agonised breath, then give the roll another bang. "Five shillings. Four and six. Four shillings. Well, I'll tell yer what I'll do. Three and six. Three and six, and I'm giving it away. All right then. Here! Pass me up that other piece, Charlie. Now then," he would burst out afresh, beating the new piece unmercifully, "there's three yards here—yer could cover a landing with it and it 'ud last yer a lifetime —and I'll put the two together. Six shillings the two." He would glare at the crowd, mop his brow, and run a finger round his sopping rag of a collar. "It's not oilcloth I'm trying to sell yer," he would begin again, and his voice was the last despairing shriek of reasoned conviction in a world hollow with doubt and fear. If any one there said that it *was*

oilcloth it seemed as if the man would have vanished in flame and smoke.

On the other side, the Professor, who had returned to set up his easel, was standing in silence, frowning upon three small boys who were waiting there to see if he would do anything to entertain them. *Do You Know Your Fate?* asked the easel, and then went on: *Professor Miro Can Tell You. What Is the Message of the Stars? Destiny! Will Power! Personality! The Chance of a Lifetime!! Don't Miss It!!!* But so far the good people of Ribsden, bargaining and chattering in the light of the sun, seemed to care nothing for the dark secrets of this life. Perhaps the Professor's hour would strike when the night stole down upon them, beckoning its old troupe of ghosts. Meanwhile, he tried, quite vainly, to intimidate the three small boys with his immense eyebrows, and stood there, in a dignified silence, nursing a packet of coloured papers.

The Professor's other neighbour, a broad-faced, spectacled young man, very carefully dressed, was as noisy as the linoleum merchant, and looked like a bank clerk in a frenzy. Nobody seemed to know what he was selling or even if he was selling anything at all. He held up a number of plain envelopes, shook them in the faces of his audience, and talked continually of one Walters of Bristol. "When Mis-ter Walters of Bris-tol," he roared in the manner of one discussing his friend the Prime Minister, "gave me these envelopes, he assured me that in every one of them there was a banknote, and he sent me down here to sell them to you purely and simply as an advertisement. Mr. Walters knew and I knew that there was no money to be made out of this. It's a good advertisement. And when Mis-ter Wal-ters guaranteed that there was a banknote in every one of these envelopes, that was good enough for me. I knew that Mis-ter Wal-ters of Bris-tol would not send me on a fool's errand, I can assure you, people." And he went on assuring them and shaking his mysterious envelopes in their faces.

A little after noon, the Professor left his stand and approached Joby. "I was wondering, Mr. Jackson," he began, in a confidential whisper, "if you had a spare shilling about you. Just until tonight, you know."

Joby nodded towards *The Helping Hand*. "Going in?"

"Yes, I thought that perhaps a little—er——"

Joby cut him short. "You come with me, Perfesser. 'Ere, George, you can take over a bit, eh? Shan't be long."

So Mr. Oakroyd was left in charge, and before Joby had returned, he had sold a vermilion stork with wooden feet, a policeman on traffic duty, and a shrimp-coloured and dropsical rubber infant, taking four shillings in all, of which, he knew, at least half-a-crown was sheer profit. This was good business.

When Joby came back, an hour later, he brought with him a bottle of beer and two meat pies. "Yer can't stir in there now," he explained, "so I got yer these, see. Knock off and get outside these, then 'ave a walk round. Wotcher done?"

Mr. Oakroyd, attacking the first of the meat pies, reported his sales. "A bird, a bobby, an' a bairn, for fower bob."

"Yer a ruddy poet, George, if yer ask me," said Joby in great good-humour. "The Perfesser's still in there. We shan't see 'im now till closing time. 'E's found the 'elping 'and all right. 'E'd lowered about five when I left, and all buckshee. 'E could talk a feller into givin' 'im a bucketful. Clever feller, the Perfesser, but I wouldn't like to see the coloured menagerie 'e sees some o' these nights."

By the time Mr. Oakroyd had finished his two pies and the bottle of beer, had walked round the fair and market and explored the town, and had returned to have a smoke with Joby, it was nearly tea-time. "Not much doing now till about six," Joby told him. "Yer can take on a bit, see. I'll 'ave a decco at the old van, a drop o' Rosie, and a word wi' some o' the boys. Don't forget them monkeys is two bob apiece—they're extra special, they are—they cost *me* ninepence."

The linoleum merchant and the friend of Mr. Walters of Bristol had each large audiences, but there appeared to be a temporary slump in rubber toys. Very few people even looked at the stall, partly, no doubt, because its two neighbours were so much more exciting and noisy. The only questions Mr. Oakroyd found himself answering referred to Joby himself and not to his stock-in-trade.

" 'Ello! This is Joby Jackson's, isn't it? Where's old Joby today?"

"Knocking about," Mr. Oakroyd would reply, and the enquirer would saunter off again.

This happened several times, and Mr. Oakroyd began to assume a

knowing air with these fellow professionalists of the road. But he was not able to do more than make a beginning. The tide that had carried him along so smoothly these past twenty-four hours suddenly turned against him. One of these fellow professionalists who had been moving aimlessly through the crowd caught sight of the stall, stopped, and stared. Mr. Oakroyd, staring back at him, came to the conclusion that he was not a pleasant-looking chap. After standing there a minute or two, the man came closer and examined the stall, its placards, its rubber dolls, its uneasy salesman, with little bloodshot eyes. He was a big man, whose huge shoulders were encased in a dirty football jersey; there was three or four days' stubble on his great prow of a jaw; and he looked as if he had recently wakened from a drunken sleep to find himself in a very bad temper. As he stood there, signs of intelligence began to dawn in his face, but the sight was not a pleasing one.

It was Mr. Oakroyd, however, who broke the silence at last. He could not stand this scrutiny any longer. "Like a doll, mate?" he asked, with dubious good-fellowship in his tone and glance.

"Like a doll!" the large man spat out in contempt. "Do I look as if I wanted a bloody doll, do I now, do I?" Then, suddenly, appallingly, he became as angry as a goaded bull. "Where's that——" and he proceeded to apply a number of words to the absent Joby that shocked Mr. Oakroyd, accustomed as he was to most of them. "Where is 'e? d'y'ear?" And he brought his huge fist down on the stall so that every stork and monkey and policeman hanging there started dancing, and then he leaned forward and pushed his face nearer to Mr. Oakroyd's.

"Well," he roared, "wot d'yer say, yer silly-looking——?"

Mr. Oakroyd kept perfectly still and quiet. This, he knew, was Jim Summers. It couldn't be any one else but Jim Summers. He remembered everything he had heard about Jim Summers. And he tried to think, and it was difficult. "Now I'll tell yer whattam going ter do, people," came the voice on the right. "And it isn't oilcloth I'm selling yer." Joby might be back any minute. Meanwhile, he wasn't here, and Jim Summers undoubtedly was. "When Mis-ter Wal-ters of Bristol," the left boomed steadily, "came to me and gave me these envelopes——" Mr. Oakroyd looked Jim Summers in the eye.

"He's not here," he muttered.

"Can't I see 'e's not 'ere! I'm asking where 'e is. Yer not a bloody stuck pig, are yer? Yer can talk, can't yer? This is 'is stall, isn't it?"

Still Mr. Oakroyd made no reply.

"I'd like ter give yer something uttud make yer open yer mouth," said the angry Summers, looking very ugly. "Well, I can wait 'ere a bit."

Mr. Oakroyd found his voice now. "It's not a bit o' good your doing that, mate. Joby Jackson's not here."

"Ar d'yer mean 'e's not 'ere," cried the other contemptuously. "This is 'is stall, isn't it? Think I don't know it!"

"Ay, but"—Mr. Oakroyd fumbled, then hurried on—"you see, I've bowt it off on him."

"Oh, since when?"

"Yesterda'," replied Mr. Oakroyd. "I took it on mesen, so you won't find him here, mate."

Mr. Summers looked puzzled. Not being a man of intellect, he took some time to arrange his ideas. Then suddenly he shook himself, banged the stall again, and shouted: "'E's been seen 'ere this morning. You bought this? You've 'ell as like, yer rotten little liar."

"Here, here, here, here! Less of it, less of it. What's it all about, eh?" This was the policeman with the ginger moustache, the one who apparently did not like markets and fairs. Now he looked very severe indeed.

"I come 'ere asking for a feller," growled Summers, "and this feller 'ere says 'e don't know where the feller is and says that this stall 'ere is 'is and I was telling 'im it wasn't 'cos I knew it belonged to this other feller, d'yer see?"

"Well, I don't see what you've got to make such a lot of noise about," said the policeman. "Either it's his or it isn't, and one way or the other, it don't seem to me to be much o' your business."

"I was only telling 'im I knew it wasn't, d'yer see?"

"All right, all right, I know what you was doing," cried the policeman angrily. "And I say it don't seem to me to be much o' your business."

"That's right," Mr. Oakroyd put in, feeling it was about time he said

something. It was, however, a very unfortunate move. The policeman, who up to now had been eyeing Summers very suspiciously, transferred his unpleasant stare to Mr. Oakroyd himself, who did not find it easy to meet it.

"Well, it may be none of his business," said the policeman, still staring, "but it's my business all right. If you ask me, there's something a bit queer here. Now you say this here outfit belongs to you and not to this other feller he's talking so much about?"

"Ay," replied Mr. Oakroyd, hesitating. "In a manner o' speaking, you might say——"

"What d'you mean 'in a manner o' speaking'?" the policeman demanded. "'Ere, let's have a look at your licence."

Mr. Oakroyd stared back at the policeman, open-mouthed. He knew nothing about licences, had no idea what a licence would look like, how much it cost, where it would be obtained. All that he did know, with a sickening certainty, was that he ought to have a licence, if his story were to be believed, and that he could not think how to begin to explain why he hadn't one.

"'E's got no licence," said Summers triumphantly.

"Who's talking to you?" the policeman demanded angrily. Then he turned to Mr. Oakroyd again and repeated, with maddening deliberation, "Let's have a look at your licence."

Fortunately for Mr. Oakroyd, the policeman's high-handed methods were too much for Jim Summers, whose temper was always uncertain and who disliked the Force. At that moment he might have been compared to a smoking volcano. He pushed his face between the other two, and repeated, very slowly and ominously, "I said 'E's got no licence.'"

"And I say 'Who's talking to you?'" cried the policeman, giving him a push. "You get back a bit."

"And oo the bloody 'ell d'you think you are?" shouted Summers, raising a huge fist. "Touch me again, yer ginger pig, and I'll flatten yer."

"Another word and you'll come along with me," retorted the policeman, stepping back.

"'Ello, 'ello! What's the row?" It was Joby, and with him was a short, thick-set, smiling man.

At the sight of Joby's companion, Summers gave a roar. "Muss, yer ——" He rushed at him but both Joby and the policeman threw themselves in the way, and the next moment they were all so many whirling arms and legs. Instantly the crowd surged round and its pressure drove them against the stall, which rocked with the fight. Mr. Oakroyd, at the other side and cut off from the combatants, could do nothing but try to keep the stall in place. A shower of rubber birds and monkeys descended upon the battlefield. *Crack!* went the stall and another shower of dolls fell, so that Mr. Oakroyd began sweeping those that were left into the boxes at the back, and then, crawling underneath, contrived to pick up a number of those that had fallen. He returned to hold on and sway with the stall. He had undertaken "to mind t'stall"—as he told himself—and what he could do, he did. There was no room for him in the fight, even if he had wished to join it. The redoubtable Summers, having sent little Tommy Muss into the dust, given Joby a black eye, and battered the policeman, was now being overpowered. The policeman had had time to blow his whistle, which brought his colleague from the other end of the market-place, and the two of them secured the person of James Summers and finally marched him away, followed by the cheers and hoots of the crowd.

Mr. Oakroyd immediately came round to the front of the stall and began picking up the remainder of the fallen toys, while Joby and his friend gasped and swore and wiped their faces and dusted their clothes.

"'Ere, didn't take any names, did 'e?" asked Joby, still panting for breath.

"He didn't take mine," said Mr. Oakroyd.

"We're off then. What d'yer say, Tommy? If they wants us for the witness-box, they must find us, see. 'Ere, get this stuff away, sharp as yer can. Come on, Tommy. That's right, George. Sharp's the word, or we'll never do it. But they've got ter get 'im ter the station, see." He turned to look at those members of the crowd that were still lingering about. "Nar then," he cried, "it's all over this time. No more performances today, people. Out o' the way, you lads." And the linoleum merchant and the friend of Mr. Walters of Bristol, taking

advantage of the fact that a crowd was already assembled at their elbows, roared out their patter again and drew all but the most obstinate of the spectators into their audiences.

"I'll get the van, see," said Joby, "and run it as near as I can, just round the Johnny Horner. Soon as yer 'ear me toot, run with as much o' the stuff as yer can carry. Get the stall down, George, and anything that's broken bad, leave it." And he hurried off.

"A troublesome business, Mr. Muss," boomed a voice above them as they packed the things.

" 'Lo Professor!" said Tommy, looking up. " 'Ow goes it? We're sliding out."

"Quite right, quite right, Mr. Muss," replied the Professor. "I should do the same myself, have done before today. Very inconvenient these police-court affairs. Besides, if you go into the box, it creates a prejudice against you in the profession. Not that Summers doesn't deserve whatever he gets—a hooligan, a tough, Mr. Muss—these low types are a disgrace to the road. They can't carry their beer, that's the trouble."

"There goes the old van," cried Tommy. "Now then, Professor, you don't know us, do you?"

"I've never seen you in my life before," the Professor replied gravely. "And I'll drop a word to the boys. Summers won't give names, of course, because you'd be hostile witnesses, though I doubt if he's the sense to see that. I'll keep an eye on these things for you."

Two hurried journeys each were enough. Mr. Oakroyd was hustled into the back, the other two sitting in front; and they rattled out of Ribsden as fast as the van would take them. Mr. Oakroyd had no idea where they were going and his backward vision of the town and the road that followed it told him nothing. The long day, the excitement of the fight, the hasty departure, had left him rather tired, and after the first few dramatic minutes of the escape from Ribsden he gradually sank into a doze, lying full length on one of the bunks. When, finally, they stopped and he struggled out, he had not the faintest notion of the distance they had come or the time they had been on the road. He found they were standing in a long village street, outside a small public-house. The landlord came to the door.

"The wife in, Joe?" cried Tommy.

"Yuss, she is. 'Ad 'er tea some time back, though," replied the landlord.

"Tell 'er I'm 'ere. 'Alf a minute, though, I'm coming in." And Tommy, giving a wink to the other two, went inside.

Joby passed the wink on to Mr. Oakroyd with the undamaged eye. "Tommy's got the tart in there," he remarked. "Been there two days, see. 'E came into Ribsden on chance of finding me there, but didn't think 'e'd find Jim Summers there. What 'appened, George?"

Mr. Oakroyd related his adventures with Mr. Summers and the officious policeman, and when he had done, Tommy emerged from the public-house, followed by a gaudy youngish woman several inches taller than himself.

"What-how, Jowby!" she cried, waving a hand. "All the best! I wish I'd bin there to see. 'E's got what 'e wanted, 'asn't 'e, the swine? Gor!—but you got an eye. You want a bit o' stike on thet eye, down't 'e, Tommy? Come in and 'ave one while I getcher a bit o' stike."

"What about it, Joby?" added Tommy. "Coming in now? The old box of tricks be all right there."

"No, I'll pull 'er out, Tommy, and find a place for 'er. Going to kip in 'er tonight, see. 'Sides, me and George'll 'ave to see what the damage is and try to straighten up if we're working that place tomorrer. See yer later, Tommy."

"I'll be 'ere," said Tommy.

"Get in front, George," said Joby, climbing in again. And off they went down the long street. "Tommy's joining up again tomorrer, see, and the tart's follering on, doing the palm business. She's all right, but a 'ole night with the two of them together—with 'er sitting on 'is knee and slapping 'im and drinking 'is beer—'ud get on my ruddy nerves."

"I dare say. She looks nowt i' my line," Mr. Oakroyd remarked dispassionately.

Joby halted at the last shop in the village, where he bought some food, and then they found a camping place by the side of the road, about a mile outside the village. There they repeated the programme of the previous evening, examining and putting in order the stock and the stall and then having a meal. But this time Joby went to the

public-house, the one in which Tommy and his temporary bride were staying, unaccompanied by Mr. Oakroyd, who said that he was too tired to move. It was true he was tired, but he was also feeling rather out of it. Joby's pal had come back, and now, he knew, he was not really wanted. Tomorrow he would have to go on alone. "Nay, I'll get to bed, Joby lad," he said, and watched him walk down the road, back to the village, but neither saw nor heard anything of Joby's return, two hours later, so deep was this, his second—and probably his last—night of sleep in a caravan, with only a three-ply breadth between him and the stars.

V

"Well, George," said Joby, the next morning, "yer done me a good turn or two, see. I'd like to keep yer on the job a bit longer, but yer see 'ow it is. And this oughter straighten us up a bit." And he handed over an extremely dirty bit of paper that turned out, much to Mr. Oakroyd's surprise, to be a pound note.

"Nay, I don't know as how I can tak' this," he said doubtfully. "You've given me summat to eat and sup and a bed like, and I've done nowt to earn this."

"Yer the first West Riding feller I ever knew to look sideways at —what do you Tykes call it?—a bit o' brass. Nar then, George, put that in yer pocket."

And Mr. Oakroyd did put it in his pocket and even tried to mumble some words of thanks, an agonising task to any true Bruddersfordian, who always tries to arrange his life so that he will be spared such appalling scenes. Mr. Oakroyd himself had always regarded with suspicion any persons—not counting affected southrons and the like—who showed a readiness to say "Please" and "Thank you," and was genuinely troubled afterwards by the thought that perhaps his travels were already sapping his manly independence and might lead him to indulge—as he said himself—"in all sorts o' daft tricks."

"And I'll tell yer what, George," Joby continued, "if yer've found nothing, get a lift to Nottingham next week—Thursday, Friday, Saturday—Goose Fair, and take a look round for me and Tommy, see. All the boys'll be there, and I might be able to find something for yer.

Good tradesman, eh, George? 'Andle a saw, every time, eh? That's the stuff. Don't ferget, Nottingham."

"Ay, if I've nowt on, I will."

"Good enough! What's the ruddy move now then, George? We can give yer a lift on the way, can't we? What say?"

Mr. Oakroyd shook his head decisively. "Nay, you go one way and I'll go t'other. You've had enough bother wi' me. Where do this here road go to?"

"'Alf a minute, 'alf a minute." Joby scratched his head, looked at the road, frowned at it, then scratched his head again. "Tommy fetched me 'ere—ter call at 'is boozer—but I been 'ere before. I've been everywhere, I 'ave. Yer can't lose me. I know, George, I know. 'Ere, go down this road, keep round to the left—'bout six miles—and yer'll come to a place called Rawsley. Biggish place—twenty or thirty boozers there—good 'uns some of 'em. A feller called Thompson—Jimmy Thompson—used to keep one—knew 'im well, used to be a welterweight, and tidy with 'em, too. That's the place—Rawsley. They 'ave a fair third week in July—not so bad, neither—best round 'ere. Yer might easy pick something up there, see. 'Ave a look at Rawsley, George."

Mr. Oakroyd brought his basket trunk and his bag of tools out of the van and then stood waiting for Joby to come out too. It was quite late in the morning and there was every indication now that the fine autumn weather they had been having had at last come to an end. There had been rain earlier on, and though it was fine now, the sky was overclouded and it was much colder than it had been. It was the wrong kind of day on which to go off on your own again; the road looked cheerless, the whole prospect forlorn. "A poor do," thought Mr. Oakroyd, waiting to say good-bye.

When Joby did come out he brought with him a little package loosely wrapped in brown paper. "Yer'll want these, George," he said. "Yer don't pass nothing on the way to Rawsley, see." He handed over the package. "Sandwiches—our own ruddy make," he explained, looking almost apologetic. "If yer don't want 'em, give 'em to the poor, George, give 'em to the poor, but for God's sake don't start arguing the toss about 'em."

"All right, Joby lad, I won't," said Mr. Oakroyd, putting on his old mackintosh and stuffing the sandwiches into the pocket. "And I hope I see thee agen afore so long." He held out his hand, feeling that he might go to any lengths now after such a desperately emotional speech.

Joby shook it enthusiastically. "Well, George, I'll tell yer something. Yer the best Yorkshire lad I've met for a long time. I'm not fond of 'em as a rule, see. I don't get on with 'em."

"Ay," replied Mr. Oakroyd gravely, "we tak' a bit o' knowing."

"But you're all right, George, you are," Joby continued, persisting with this imaginary Christian name to the very end. "And any time yer want to find me, just drop me a line to *The World's Fair*—that's our paper, see—Joby Jackson, care of *The World's Fair*. That'll find me all right every time. So long, George, and all the best!"

Half a mile down the road a spatter of rain overtook Mr. Oakroyd, and at the end of the next half-mile it was raining in good earnest, so that he thought it wiser to shelter under some trees. He sat down on his two bags and pulled out his pipe and pouch. But there were only a few crumbs of *Old Salt* left, enough perhaps for one small pipe, and he wisely decided that this was not the time to smoke them. "I mun save 'em till I've had summat to eat," he told himself. He sat there in his chill and glistening mackintosh, forlornly watching the raindrops dance on the road and an occasional faded leaf flutter down to his feet. A postman on a bicycle went past, then a large closed car; and that was all the traffic there was. Try as he might, Mr. Oakroyd could not drown a little voice that kept asking him if he had not been a fool to leave home and wander about like this. True, he was better off than he had been two mornings ago, for then he had had nothing at all and now he had a pound. But what was a pound? And what was he to do now? There weren't many Jobys about. This thought brought him closer to the heart of his melancholy. It was the joyous reunion of Joby and his pal Tommy that had really made him feel so desolate. Joby had been a good sort but he didn't want him, Jess Oakroyd, not after his own pal had come back. Nobody wanted him, except Lily, who was far away in Canada, and even she didn't seem to mind their not being together. There wasn't a chap in Bruddersford who would care twopence where Jess Oakroyd was and

what had happened to him. Even Sam Oglethorpe wouldn't bother his head five minutes about him. And his own wife and son were glad to be rid of him. And yet he was a friendly chap really, only too willing to put in a good bit of hard work for somebody and then have his pipe and pint afterwards with a mate or two. At least, so it seemed to him, but as he thought it over and over, in a dragging and dreary fashion, his mind grew shadowy and fearful with doubt. Perhaps there was something wrong with him. But now his feet touched solid ground and he sprang up, erect. "There's nowt wrong wi' me," he declared sturdily. "I'll ha' summat to eat."

He pulled out the sandwiches and, remembering how Joby had given them to him, he felt a little more cheerful. As he munched away, the sun came struggling through again and the rain dwindled to a few glittering drops. The road looked more inviting now than the chill damp shade of the trees, and he hurried through his little meal, lit the last shreds of *Old Salt,* then walked out into the sunlight. He was wandering on again. The thought brought him a tiny thrill of pleasure now. As he trudged down the road, he mused upon that first fine clatter down the Great North Road, the Kirkworth Inn, Mr. Poppleby and Joby and the Professor and the rubber dolls. Their images were still popping in and out of his mind when he reached a crossroads and saw that the signpost to the left pointed to Rawsley. As he turned down this new road, a sudden excitement took possession of him. He even stopped, put down his bags, took the pipe out of his mouth, and spoke aloud.

"Eh," he cried, "but I've seen summat this week. I've had a bit o' fun on me travels if I never see nowt no more."

Perhaps that began it all. They were brave words, manfully spoken from the heart, and we do not know how far such words may travel nor what they may set in motion. A minute or two later, he turned a corner and saw that the length of road before him was empty except for a single stationary object some distance away. It was a small car. He walked towards it, leisurely, incuriously. He did not know that this was to be, for him, no ordinary car, that he was casually crossing the threshold of another world.

Chapter Five

MISS TRANT IS ALMOST A SECOND COLUMBUS

I

The car was the same two-seater Mercia that had carried Miss Trant so bravely out of Hitherton four days before. It was not perhaps the same Elizabeth Trant, certainly not the one Hitherton had known. She had been running about, discovering England, all by herself; marching into hotels and demanding beds and breakfasts and dinners and lunches; talking about roads and cars and cathedrals to strangers, mostly men. This was something. Indeed, after you had lived with the Colonel for twenty years at Hitherton, it was a great deal, a wild rush of independent life. But it was nothing—mere touristry—compared with her other adventures. The little car had taken her further than the most distant cathedral, the loneliest hotel. It had plumped her into the middle of other people's lives, the most fantastic places in the world. She had not forsworn her allegiance to the historical romance —and had read two out of the four she carried with her—but now she regarded its figures with a different eye, meeting its conspirators and dragoons on something like terms of equality. Indeed, she could afford to pity them, for though they had to grapple with all the urgencies of life they appeared to have been denied all but a crumb or so from its vast stores of comic relief. She was beginning to feel now that she knew both.

After the first splendid hour or two of escape, Monday had not been an exciting day. Ely, she found, was just fifteen miles too far, so she stayed that night in Cambridge—a town she had visited before—at *The Lion* in Petty Cury. Term had not yet begun and the little grey town, which she remembered as a riot of rowing enthusiasts, salmon mayonnaise, ices, and lawns lit with Chinese lanterns, was now

pleasantly empty, only engaged in decking out its windows with a new stock of caps and gowns and college ties and tobacco jars. She had a little stroll before dinner, ate heartily, then sipped her coffee in the glass-covered lounge, which pleased her because it reminded her of being on board ship. By this time, she was eager to talk to somebody, and did her best with her neighbour, a large upholstered sort of woman who stared straight in front of her, above a magnificent Roman nose.

"I find it more tiring than I thought it would be, driving by oneself, I mean," explained Miss Trant.

"Do you?" said the other, in her deep contralto voice.

"Perhaps it's because there's nobody to share things with," Miss Trant continued, eagerly, "all the little difficulties and dangers and triumphs, you know."

"Indeed!" The woman still stared straight in front of her.

"It may be because I'm inexperienced, of course," Miss Trant faltered. It was not easy to talk to this nose.

"I dare say," said the other, achieving her very lowest notes but not moving a muscle of her face.

Miss Trant looked at her and wondered sadly why people should be so unfriendly. The next moment, however, the woman's face lit up and she jumped to her feet with surprising agility. A boy about eighteen had just entered the lounge, obviously her son. The woman had not been unfriendly but simply absent-minded. Miss Trant felt relieved. She looked about her again, only to meet the gaze of the man opposite, a man with protruding grey eyes, admirably adapted for staring fixedly at strangers, and a heavy greying moustache that he fondled as if it were a privilege to have access to such a creation. She made the mistake of meeting his stare very frankly. It brought him over to the vacated chair at her side.

"Mind if I sit here?" he enquired, in a thick voice.

"Not at all," said Miss Trant, looking hard at the chair he had just left.

"Thanks. Awfully quiet here, isn't it?" he continued, his eyes bulging at her.

"Is it?"

"Well, dontcher think so? I know this place pretty well, come here three or four times a year, you know. Not much to do here in the evening, specially if the boys aren't up. Usually drop into the pictures myself."

She may have led a quiet life, but she was no fool. There was no mistaking his doggish inviting air. And a minute or two ago, she had been telling herself that people were too unfriendly. And now—this. It was too absurd. She wanted to laugh, and some little sound must have made its way out.

"Pardon," and the man leaned forward.

Her amusement somehow brought her into command of the situation. She fixed her eyes upon the heavy moustache, as if it were a curious museum exhibit, and remarked: "I was wondering if all the men in my family had decided to go to the pictures. I'm waiting for them now, and they're late."

"Oh, waiting for them, are you?" There was a change in his tone.

"Yes," she continued hastily. "My father, my two brothers, my husband, and our two boys. Quite a crowd of them. They're awfully late."

He stared at her, but it was quite a different stare. "Yes, time's getting on, isn't it?" he mumbled. He pretended to look at his watch. "Time I was moving on." And he moved.

He left Miss Trant wondering at herself, at her impudence, her courage, her staggering presence of mind. She felt as if she were a schoolgirl again and yet a woman of the world, though no woman of the world, she reflected, would have ever stooped to such a ridiculous fifth-form trick. Something—money or freedom or both—had changed her. She wanted to unbosom herself to somebody very badly now, so she wrote a long letter to Dorothy Chillingford. Then she went to bed.

Next morning, about eleven o'clock, she was at Ely, enraptured by the dramatic splendours of the cathedral. It was at the top of the tower that she made the acquaintance of the fierce little elderly man, apparently the only other visitor there. He had very bright eyes, pink cheeks, a bristling beard, and one of those old-fashioned turned-down collars that always suggest that their wearers are William Morris social-

ists or vegetarians or leaders of surprising little religious sects. She never learned which of these he was, never knew his name, business, or place of address; but nevertheless they were soon on very friendly terms. It was impossible that they should be silent when they were standing on the high tower together, looking down upon the sunlit plain of Cambridgeshire. He had a map with him and insisted upon pointing out to her every landmark on the horizon. Then they explored the rest of the cathedral together, and she found him a most learned and entertaining companion, in spite of his staccato dogmatic manner. "Do you know anything about brasses? You don't, eh? Then I'll explain." And he would explain, and he hurried her from one part of the building to another, explaining. Miss Trant felt sometimes as if she were back at school, but it was impossible not to like him.

Both of them, it appeared, had left their cars outside *The Lamb*, so they walked back there together and shared a table for lunch. It was during this meal that Miss Trant let fall a remark that was some consequence because it led to a change in her programme.

"Isn't it a pity we can't build like that now, make really beautiful things?"

"No pity at all!" he cried, putting down his fork. "We can; we do. My dear young lady, don't you believe that stuff. All rubbish! The world progresses. We can build when we want to. I don't say we build anything like Ely here—we don't want to—not our style—all wonder that, cultivated by barbarism, no knowledge of the universe in it—but I say we can build as well, can build better. Look at the new County Hall in London. Have you seen it? Look at the Bush Building. Have you seen that? Have you seen that enormous block of offices near London Bridge? You must get that idea out of your head at the earliest possible moment, you really must, if you'll forgive my saying so. You say you are going round looking at the cathedrals —that's the plan isn't it? Well, have you seen Liverpool?"

No, she had not seen Liverpool.

"Go to Liverpool at once," he commanded, and was so impressive that she felt she ought to hurry away that very moment. He was as bad as Mr. Chillingford. And what a pair they would make!

"Now you can't say I'm not interested in these medieval creations,"

he continued earnestly. "You can't say I don't appreciate them. This morning you probably thought I was a little too interested and appreciative, the way I dragged you round and talked your head off. But at Liverpool there's a brand-new cathedral, finished the other day—so to speak. Not a town-hall or a railway station or a block of offices, but a cathedral, the very thing you're talking about."

He paused to take breath, and Miss Trant, who was reminded a little of her father, regarded him with friendly amusement.

"Now what's it like, this cathedral? Is it a little shuffling jerry-built hotch-potch thing? It is not. It's large, it's solid, it's enduring. It's beautiful, it's sublime. And who made it? The men of today. Don't be misled by this medieval nonsense. We're better men than they were, and we live in a better world. Building was their chief trick; it's not ours; but when we want to build, we can outbuild 'em. You never give a thought to most of our building," he lectured away, for ever taking up his fork and then putting it down again. "Take the big liners—there's building for you. Look at one of 'em." He said this as if there were several just outside the window. "There's adaptation to ends, there's beauty of design, there's solid craftsmanship and workmanship, everything there in a big liner. You go to Liverpool, look at the cathedral, then take a peep or two at some of the liners in dock, and you'll soon change your mind about our building. You were going there anyhow, I suppose?"

Miss Trant found herself compelled to say, untruthfully, that she was. It would have been terrible to have told him that she had never even thought about Liverpool; he would never have eaten any lunch.

"Then go there at once, my dear young lady," he replied, eager as a boy. "See it before this nonsense takes root in your mind. I insist upon your going there next. It's only a pleasant day's run from here. I'll show you on the map after lunch." And he fell to gobbling his lunch, he was so anxious to have done with it and to show her the map.

Miss Trant sat there, eating daintily, and envying his complete absorption in the matter in hand. It might be babyish, but it must be great fun, she thought, to be swallowed up by things like that. She could as well go to Liverpool as to Lincoln or York, and she de-

cided she would go there, if only to please him. It would, too, be a friendly gesture towards the eagerly-forgetting-all-about-yourself, which only needed what she determined now to call "a swallower." Buildings and anti-medievalism and progress were apparently all swallowers for this old gentleman, now galloping rather noisily through his blackberry tart. Perhaps she had served other people's swallowers too long; it was time she had one of her own. But then there might be one waiting for her at Liverpool.

"Here you are then," cried the old gentleman enthusiastically, pointing to the map. "Huntingdon, Kettering, Leicester, Derby, Macclesfield, Warrington, Liverpool. Almost a straight run across country."

She examined the route carefully. It seemed to take her through a number of industrial towns, places with trams and lorries and narrow main streets. "Will there be a lot of traffic?" she enquired dubiously.

"Traffic! What's wrong with traffic? Why, I can give you thirty years, but I like traffic. The more traffic the better. I like to see a place bustling, alive. It does me good to drive through a town that's got some trade. It's—it's inspiring. You're not going to tell me that you're frightened of traffic."

"Yes I am," she said firmly. "I don't like it at all. If I'd more experience, I might not mind it so much, but as it is, I'm terrified. I never know which side I ought to pass a tram on, and when the great lumbering things look as if they're going to pin me between them I can't possibly console myself by thinking the town is very busy."

"Pass them on any side. I do." He waved an arm carelessly. "I like these little problems of driving. They keep me young. In and out, in and out, stop, go on, in and out again—nothing pleases me better. It will you soon, too, you mark my words. But you've nothing to be afraid of on this route." And he went over the route again, and made such a fuss about it and was so friendly and absurd that she felt herself compelled to fall in with his plan.

"But I can't go all that way today, of course," she told him.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not," he cried, rather testily. Then he ran his finger over the map. "You could get as far as Macclesfield," he finally announced.

She looked for herself. "Leicester would be quite far enough for me."

"Leicester! A stone's-throw, a mere stone's-throw! You could have tea there, then run on to Macclesfield. That's the place obviously."

Miss Trant shook her head. She did not see why she should be dictated to in this fashion. "I shall have done quite enough by the time I reach Leicester."

"My dear young lady, I don't believe you can read a map, I really don't believe you can. You're talking nonsense, you know." He seemed quite irritated. "You couldn't have an easier run than to Macclesfield."

She smiled at him. "Yes, I could, and I'm going to. Just as far as Leicester."

"It's ridiculous," he exploded. He slapped the map angrily with his open hand. "Really, you know, you're not *trying*. It's most annoying the way you're not trying."

Her only reply to this absurd protest was a little peal of laughter. The whole idiocy of the situation burst upon her. "I'm sorry," she faltered at last.

"So am I," he ejaculated. "Very." And he marched out of the dining-room and banged the door behind him.

The door at the other end of the room then opened to admit the head of the waiter. "Did the gentleman call?" he enquired.

"No, I don't think he did," she replied. "He went out."

The waiter withdrew and had no sooner closed his door than the other opened and the old gentleman marched in again. He walked straight up to her, looking pinker and more bristling than ever. "I beg your pardon, my dear young lady, I really beg your pardon," he said earnestly. "Most stupid of me. You must go as far as you like and stay where you like, of course. It's no business of mine at all, is it?" Then he smiled and turned himself into a very charming old gentleman indeed. "But you will go to Liverpool sometime, won't you, and remember what I said?"

"This very day," said Miss Trant, and they became more friendly than ever.

She never learned his name, and after a time remembered nothing

of him but a voice and vague patch of pink cheek and bristling beard; but she always believed afterwards that it was he who really began it all by hurling her across country towards Liverpool. If he had not insisted upon her going there, she would say, nothing would ever have happened, thereby forgetting that she had been busy turning herself into one of those persons round whom things always happen, and also forgetting, as we all do, that the one road we have chosen out of a hundred is not the only road lined with adventure. Perhaps she was right, however, in saying that the particular adventures she did have were really set in motion by the nameless old gentleman who shot her across the map. But she never arrived at Liverpool, and to this day has never even caught a glimpse of the town of Macclesfield.

II

She spent Tuesday night at Market Harborough. The next morning, she ran through Leicester, or rather lost herself in what seemed a nightmare of traffic and unlabelled streets and then miraculously found her way out of it, pushed on through Derby, and by lunch-time was out in the rising open country beyond. She came to a village clustered about an important junction of roads, and saw at the corner a pleasant little hotel that promised lunch. There were two cars already drawn up before the front door, but she was able to slip in between them. It was then she noticed that the car in front seemed exactly like her own, the same kind of two-seater and painted an identical light blue. She entered the hotel wondering idly what sort of people owned this twin car.

There were only two persons having lunch. Miss Trant was given a small table in the opposite corner, but as the dining-room was quite narrow she was not far away from her fellow lunchers. They were a curious pair. The woman was about her own age, a large square blonde with a wandering nose and a mouth that was so big, so loose, and so vividly and inhumanly carmined, that it seemed to have no connection with the rest of the face, to be a dreadful afterthought. She was cheaply but showily dressed, a jangling sort of woman, and she talked very quickly and loudly and was evidently in nervous high spirits. Her companion was nervous but not in high spirits. He was a neat com-

pressed little man, with dark hair parted in the middle, pince-nez above a button of a nose, and tiny moustache. He looked vaguely uneasy. Miss Trant told herself that he reminded her of a rabbit.

Before Miss Trant had finished her soup, there were sounds of other arrivals outside, and in a few minutes four men, three stout and one thin, clomped in and seated themselves at the other end of the room.

The large blonde woman, who was halfway through her lunch, had been fussing some time with a heavy coat. Now she stood up, took it off, and exclaimed, in a curious mincing accent apparently assumed for everybody's benefit: "This cowt's an orful nuisance. I'll have it pet in the caw." She looked about for the waitress, but the waitress was ostentatiously busying herself with the men's table, so she walked out with the coat herself, obviously enjoying the little fuss she was making, and returned in a moment.

"All ri'?" enquired her companion, in a weak high voice that was exactly what you expected from him.

"I told the man to pet it in the caw, deear," replied the woman, reseating herself and attacking the boiled mutton with an indescribable air of luxurious pleasure.

Miss Trant had just decided that she had watched and wondered at this odd pair long enough, when the telephone bell rang. The telephone was in the dining-room, and the waitress answered it. Everybody else looked at her and listened intently, finding it impossible, as usual, to be indifferent to a telephone.

"Yes it is," cried the waitress through the mouthpiece. "That's right." Then she listened. "How should I know?" She listened again. "Like what?" she asked, frowning. "Oh, I see." And then her glance went travelling round the room and finally rested on the odd pair. It was very exciting as nobody even pretended to eat. "Well, I don't know," said the waitress dubiously, still looking the same way. Miss Trant shot a glance there too, and noticed that the little man seemed very restive. "I dare say it might be," the waitress continued, "but why don't you give the name. I'll ask if you give me the name. All right. Hold on a minute." She put down the receiver and called out to the little man: "Beg your pardon, but are you Mr. Tipstead? Mr. Eric Tipstead?"

Miss Trant saw him start up involuntarily, saw the woman give him

a sharp warning glance, lay a hand on his arm, and give a lightning shake of her head. "No, no," the woman cried hastily, too hastily.

"It isn't, eh?" the waitress called out.

"No—er—certainly not," the man quavered in anything but a tone of certainty. He seemed desirous of appearing as if he were not really very sure just then what his name might be.

The woman, however, had no such subtle reservations in her manner. "Johnson's the name, Miss—Johnson," she cried. She evidently shared with the waitress a conviction that it was more polite to talk about "the name" than to say "your name" or "our name."

"Perhaps she had worked in an hotel too," Miss Trant told herself. She had missed nothing of this.

"Not the name," the waitress informed the telephone. Then after a pause: "Well, I can't help that, can I?" The tone in which she said this suggested that it was no business of hers if her patrons chose to tell lies, though she had her own private opinion of them. Then she replaced the receiver and hurried out with her tray.

Miss Trant was now positive that the little man, the very uneasy little man, was Mr. Eric Tipstead. To begin with, he looked exactly like a Mr. Eric Tipstead. Then she was certain she had heard the woman addressing him as "Eric deear." And why should he have started up when he heard the name, why should the woman have restrained him? Johnson too! Nothing could be less convincing. Johnson was mere impudence.

She kept her eye on them. They were now eating away for dear life, wanting to get away as soon as they could but equally determined to have their three shillings' worth each if it choked them. In another five minutes they were hurrying out, and Miss Trant heard a car give a familiar gasp or two, then a rattle, then a roar immediately afterwards. Never had a car sounded so guilty; there was nervous apprehension in every diminishing hoot. Miss Trant was left to ponder the mystery of Mr. Eric Tipstead and his partner, without whom the dining-room was very commonplace, just so much boiled mutton and treacle pudding, so many fat men and whisky advertisements. She was aching to ask the waitress what had been said to her on the telephone, but even in her new character of independent woman, who dashed from Ely to

Liverpool and stalked in and out of hotels, she could not do it. The waitress herself trotted about, looking as if she could tell a tale if she wanted to, and she had dropped some remark that had made the four men roar with laughter. It was most irritating. Miss Trant did not bolt her lunch Tipstead fashion, but on the other hand she did not linger over it as long as she might have done. And she gave the waitress only fourpence, instead of sixpence.

There were at least half-a-dozen cars and vans standing outside the front of the hotel now, but she was astonished to find that her own car was not there at all. She stood on the threshold, staring in bewilderment. Then she walked round the assembled cars. It was not there.

"I'm looking for my car," she explained to a man who was hanging about the door. "I left it here."

"Ar," said the man, looking wise. "Blue two-seater was it?"

She replied, eagerly, that it was.

"Ar. It's round the corner 'ere. 'Ad to shift one of 'em about 'alf an hour ago." And he led the way round the corner.

There it was, much to her relief. She climbed in, and was about to start the engine when she noticed there was something strange about the dashboard, something strange indeed about the whole interior.

"All right, miss?" the man asked.

"All wrong. This isn't my car." She got out and looked at it.

"Then whose car is it?" the man, anxious to be helpful, walked round the car after her.

"I don't know whose car it is, I only know it isn't mine. It's like it but it isn't it. I'm afraid that sounds ridiculous. Well, I suppose my car must be about somewhere."

The man began to stare at her and as he stared his mouth slowly opened.

"I remember now," she went on, not bothering about him, for he seemed very stupid. "This car was in front of mine when I went in to lunch. I noticed that it seemed extraordinarily like mine. Yes, this is the one." She broke off; it was impossible to talk to that fish-like stare. "What's the matter?"

"They took it," the man said slowly.

"Who took what? Do you mean my car? Did some one mistake it for this? I know. Was it——" she hesitated.

"About 'alf an hour ago," the man put in. "Just after I'd 'ad to move this. A couple comes dashing out, gets in, goes off without a word. Smallish feller with eye-glasses, it was. His wife picks up a big coat that's lying over the side, puts it on, and then they're off without a word."

"The Tipsteads!" cried Miss Trant.

"I beg yer pardon, Miss."

"That's the name of the people who took it, or at least I think it is. Tipstead."

"If 'e was that by name, 'e wasn't that by nature," the man observed rather bitterly. "As I say, 'e gives me nothing for my trouble but goes off without a word. And then 'e goes and takes the wrong car, seemingly. Now if 'e'd only said something. They were trying it on, if you ask me. I says to myself at the time, I says 'you're in a bit of a 'urry, aren't you.' Going off like that without a word! I might 'ave known!"

"But this is absurd," cried Miss Trant. "They've taken my car and now they're miles away. What on earth am I to do?"

"I should take theirs if I was you," said the man with an air of deep cunning.

"But I don't want theirs. They've got all my things. Which way did they go?"

"Took the north road." And the man pointed.

"I wonder if I could overtake them," she mused. "I suppose I could drive this one. But how do I know this *is* theirs? It might belong to somebody else."

"That's theirs all right," he replied. "I saw 'em come up in it. It's the spit image o' yours, too."

She got into the car again, started it up, and ran it backwards and forwards once or twice. It was as easy to handle as her own, and was indeed a twin Mercia. Finally, she reversed it round to the front of the hotel, with the vague idea of consulting the landlord. At that moment a motorcycle came tearing up to the hotel. It stopped just as she stopped.

"Where is he, where is he?" cried a very angry feminine voice. "Where is he?—you—you——" here it choked a little—"you big vamp, you!"

Miss Trant looked round and was astonished to find that the furious little woman who had just jumped out of the sidecar was screaming at her. "What on earth are you talking about?" she cried.

The woman was even more astonished. As she stared, her face fell. "Oo, I'm sorry." She was now joined by the young man who had dismounted from the motorcycle. "This isn't her, Willy," she wailed. Then she looked at the car, and her eyes grew round and her mouth opened. "This is our car, isn't it, Willy? I'm sure it is."

Willy, a very stolid young man, looked it over carefully and announced that it was certainly their car.

"I know what he's done," she wailed again. "You needn't tell me. He's gone and sold it. Three hours away and the first thing he does is to sell the car. She's made him sell it."

"We'll see about that," said Willy, unmoved. "We can ask, can't we?" And he looked at Miss Trant.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Miss Trant, looking from one to the other, "but I can assure you this car doesn't belong to me."

"Then what are you doing in it?" Willy broke in, rudely.

Miss Trant, who was annoyed, gave him a sharp glance. "Please be quiet a moment," she commanded. "Otherwise, I can't explain. This car belongs to some people who have just gone off in *my* car."

"That's right." This was from the first man, who felt it was time he took charge of the situation. "You see, a party comes out, gets in this lady's car, goes off without a word——"

"What sort of party?" asked Willy.

"A little-ish feller with eye-glasses——"

"Eric!" cried the woman. "I knew it, I knew it. What did I tell you, Willy?"

"Sounds like him all right," Willy agreed.

"A biggish woman, fair-'aired, 'is wife was," the man continued.

"His wife!" The way in which the agitated little woman let loose these two syllables confirmed Miss Trant. This was Mrs. Eric Tipstead.

She was small and dark, like her husband, but looked altogether more energetic and purposeful. She was one of those little stringy women who never seem to tire.

"They left the hotel in rather a hurry," Miss Trant began.

"Yes, I'll bet they did," said Mrs. Tipstead grimly, folding up her mouth.

"And they ran off in my car. That was about half an hour ago."

"You hear that, Willy?" cried Mrs. Tipstead. "In for a penny, in for a pound. Taking cars now! She goes and makes him take this lady's car right under her nose."

"Hold on, Sis, hold on," Willy put in. "He didn't mean to take it, you bet. Did he?" And he appealed to Miss Trant and the other man.

"No, of course he didn't," said Miss Trant.

"It's as easy to explain as anything you could wish for, considering, that is, it's a bit of a mix-up," said the man. And he began an immense narrative or what would obviously have developed into an enormous narrative if Miss Trant had not cut it short by giving a brief account of the affair as she saw it.

"There's no doubt this is his car, then?" asked Miss Trant at the end of her story.

"Not a bit. Look, there's his bag." She pointed to the luggage in the dicky seat. "And—and—look there, Willy—that's hers." She plucked out the suit-case and flung it down on the road. "The impudence of it, with a bag and all!" And then, quite suddenly, surprisingly, she burst into tears and had to lean against her brother, who did not support her very tenderly or even adequately. Miss Trant, who was still sitting in the car, looked on and felt very foolish.

"What are you going to do then, Sis?" asked Willy, a practical man clearly at a disadvantage.

Some choking sounds from Mrs. Tipstead might have been interpreted to mean that she intended to follow her erring husband.

Miss Trant came to the conclusion it was time she intervened. The relations between Mr. and Mrs. Tipstead and the large blonde were no business of hers, and the thought of being in any way entangled in their affairs made her shudder; but the fact remained that her car

and most of her best clothes were being rushed into the North somewhere by Mr. Tipstead at that very moment. She was confident that whatever he did, he would not return to the hotel with the car. He must have known that it was his wife who rang up when they were having lunch.

"The point is," she said clearly and calmly, "do you happen to know where these—where Mr. Tipstead is going? The very moment you came I was just setting out to try and overtake them. The man showed me which road they took. And we're only wasting time, you know."

"Yes, I do know," replied Mrs. Tipstead, calmer now. "At least I've a good idea. If I hadn't, I couldn't have come so far. I got her address and they're going there. I found a letter she'd sent him, found it this very morning. I'll bet he doesn't even know he's lost it yet, but he's going to know very soon, mark my words. She's got a house at Sheffield, and they're going there."

"Can you drive this car?"

"No, I can't, and that's another thing. Never would let me touch it, artful monkey! Said I might hurt myself! A lot he cared!"

"Then you must come with me," said Miss Trant. "That's the only thing to do. If you really think they've gone to this address you have, we must go there, too. I don't want this car of yours and I certainly do want my own and all my things that are in it."

"That's so," said Willy, obviously much relieved. "I'll have to get back anyhow, Sis. You'll get to Sheffield easy before dark, and this lady'll look after you."

"Oh, I can look after myself all right," exclaimed Mrs. Tipstead. "And it does seem best, doesn't it, Willy?" Then she turned to Miss Trant and suddenly became very stiff and genteel. "I'm sure it's very kind of you, Miss—er. I'm Mrs. Tipstead."

"My name is Trant."

It seemed as if "Very pleased to meet you" was only prevented at the last moment from popping out. Perhaps the absurdity of it in that situation dawned on Mrs. Tipstead just in time. All she said, after some hesitation, was: "Very—kind indeed of you, Miss Trant." Then she turned aside with her brother.

Miss Trant hunted for a map in the car but could not find one.

There was one hanging in the hall of the hotel, however, and she traced the route to Sheffield on it with her finger. When she returned to the car, she found Mrs. Tipstead sitting in it and staring straight ahead, down the road to the North, like a small damp fury.

It was a fantastic journey. The road crossed the valleys of the Dove and the Derwent and wound about the lower spurs of the Peak. They ran along green troughs powdered with dust; they sailed up towards great castles of vapour, rosy Himalayas of cloud; they sank through hollows of blue air cupped round with grass; and all the hills, the dales and dingles, the farmhouses came curving to meet them, steadily shone or gloomed for a moment, then slipped noiselessly away like places in a dream. So it seemed to one part of Miss Trant, which saw nothing, knew nothing, but this pageantry, went mazed with wonder, flashing a wing, through the golden afternoon. But she was triune; and the other two of her were very differently occupied. One was busy with the mechanism of the car, and a little dubious of the matter of gears. The other—it was a fair division—had to attend to fellow humanity, which was present in the form of Mrs. Tipstead. At first, Mrs. Tipstead was very stiff, very quiet. Miss Trant did not know what to do with her. It is not easy to make conversation with a strange woman, a woman, moreover, with a social background very different from your own, when you are helping her to overtake a runaway husband. It is all the more difficult when two thirds of you are busy elsewhere, up on the hill, down among the gears. Miss Trant did what she could, however, and very soon Mrs. Tipstead, who was not equal to the task of keeping up her stiff genteel manner, began pouring out her confidences.

Miss Trant had murmured something about tea.

"I reely couldn't, you know, Miss Trant," Mrs. Tipstead cried into her ear. "I believe a mouthful would choke me. You don't know how I feel, I'm that worked up." There was genuine distress in her tones, but there was also a certain melodramatic gusto. Obviously she rather like the thought of being choked by a mouthful.

Miss Trant said nothing because there did not seem to be anything suitable to say. One of those vague little sympathetic noises would have done, but you cannot make them in a car, at least you cannot

possibly make them loud enough to be heard. It is not easy, she reflected, saying anything to some one who confesses to being "worked up." You really ought to shout back: "I hope you'll soon be worked down."

"It's pretty country, isn't it?" Mrs. Tipstead remarked quite unexpectedly. "I've always been fond of this part. I like a bit of nice scenery, don't you? Eric now—my husband—never cared for it much. There, I'm beginning again. I won't say another word." And she threw herself back against the seat.

"Do go on, unless you really don't want to," said Miss Trant. She wanted to add to this, to say something tactful, sympathetic, but discovered she could not frame a sentence that would suggest the right attitude, something between brutal indifference and equally brutal curiosity.

The other was silent for a minute or two, but her thoughts demanded relief. "I shouldn't have minded half so much," she declared suddenly, "if he'd been honest with me, if he'd had it out with me. But to go sneaking off like that! Just leaving a bit of a note! I shouldn't have known anything if it hadn't been for that letter she sent him I found this morning, the one with her address on, this address we're going to in Sheffield. Not that I didn't know something was going on. I knew that all right. There's no smoke without fire, is there? When me lord's out night after night, I knew there was something on. 'Business,' he says, leaving me to look after the shop. You see, we've got a shop—nice little business—sweets and tobacco and newspapers and fancies—and he does a bit in the insurance line, too, and of course that does take him out at night. But it never took him out as much as all that. Besides, I could tell the diff'rence—you always can, can't you?—because he'd try to sneak out and then if I faced him with it, he'd go off in a minute, fairly screaming at me, telling me I didn't understand what business was. You always know, don't you, when they get angry like that about nothing, they're hiding something. It's their consciences, if you ask me. They know they're doing wrong, silly babies. Well, I pretended not to see. You can't do anything else, can you?"

There was a large car coming towards them, travelling at a great speed

almost in the middle of the road, and Miss Trant had to attend to this car. When they had passed it, she found it quite impossible to settle any problem in conjugal tactics. "I don't know," she replied.

"No, of course you don't. I was quite forgetting. Well, I've always said you've got to have it out right at the first, as soon as you notice anything, or you've got to leave it alone, keep your dignity, you see. And I left it alone, soft thing that I was. And this is what's happened. Catch me doing it again! But I thought I knew him all right." She thought about this for a moment, then went on: "And so I do. It's her I don't know. But I've heard a few things about her, and if I didn't know what I do know, you wouldn't see me here now. If she'd been a bit different, he could have had her and welcome. I've got my pride. But if you ask me, he's just been dragged into this, couldn't help himself. She's said 'Come' and he's gone. I know him."

She said no more but stared fiercely ahead, down the road that led to Sheffield, where her Eric was waiting to be rescued.

Remembering that odd pair in the dining-room, Miss Trant concluded that this view of the situation was probably the right one. She had now to transform those vague figures of fun into the real people of Mrs. Tipstead's vehement declarations. It was strange; it was rather frightening. For the moment she was repelled by the thought of this sheer thrust of life beneath these grotesque surfaces. It would not do. She told herself she ought not to feel like that. It was mean, cowardly, snobbish perhaps; it was—horrible thought—what people call old-maidish. She had not the slightest desire to be married, and especially at this moment, but she shuddered at the idea of being old-maidish. She must not mind being jostled by things, by people, by life; she must be ready to take hold herself.

"Only eight miles to Sheffield now," she announced.

"Do you know, Miss Trant——" Mrs. Tipstead hesitated. "It wouldn't make any difference, would it?—I mean to getting there in time. But I'm beginning to feel I'd like a cup of tea, if we could find a nice place. I haven't had anything since breakfast, and I'm beginning to feel a bit faint, and I think just a little of something would do me good. What do you think?"

"I'm sure it would," replied Miss Trant heartily. "We'll stop at the next decent place."

They pulled up at a little tea-room and had the place to themselves. Tea meant confidences to Mrs. Tipstead, and as soon as she had poured the first two cups she began the story of her dreadful morning, the note, the discovery of the road, the summoning of her brother Willy, who knew the road and so had suggested telephoning to one or two hotels where the runaways might have halted for lunch. "We didn't do that till we'd started off ourselves, you know," she explained. "From Lichfield, you know. That's where we live."

"Lichfield! Then that's why she said Johnson." Miss Trant felt like Sherlock Holmes, an old favourite of hers. And she had spent hours and hours—it seemed like years—reading Boswell's *Life of Johnson* to the Colonel, whose robust passion for Boswell and Gibbon had now closed the Eighteenth Century to his daughter for ever.

"Who said Johnson?" Mrs. Tipstead stared over the piece of buttered tea-cake she held.

"Why, that woman, when the waitress asked if they were called Tipstead." And she told the story of the telephone call.

"It just shows you, doesn't it?" Mrs. Tipstead was bitterly triumphant. "He'd have never had enough off to do that. But trust her! This isn't the first time, if you ask me. I've heard about her. What's she like?"

Miss Trant gave a brief and unflattering description.

"I thought so. I've never set eyes on her, that's the funny thing. As far as I can make out, she's only been in the place about three or four months, came as a barmaid. She'd been on the stage a bit before that, Willy says. You know the sort. But then I don't suppose you do, Miss Trant, a lady like you. I don't know much about that sort myself, I'm sure, never being one for theatres and going to hotels and all that. That's Eric's style, though, always was. He always thought he could have done well on the stage, and I dare say he could—comic, you know, when he gets going, good as a pantomime. I've laughed sometimes till I've had to tell him to stop. That's what attracted her, I'll be bound, that and his looks. Going there night after night, putting it on a bit and playing the comic, you know, that's what's did it. And me waiting

on in the shop, night after night!" She halted between anger and tears. "Aren't you ready for another cup, Miss Trant. I'm sure you are."

Miss Trant was not quite ready. She was indeed rather busy trying to reconcile this Mr. Tipstead, so dashing, so droll, so fascinating to the other sex, with the little rabbit of a man she remembered at the hotel.

Mrs. Tipstead poured out another cup for herself, and having tasted it, plunged into further confidences. "I'll tell you what it was that turned him. I thought it was the best bit of luck we'd ever had when it happened, but you can never tell how things'll turn out, can you? This last March he won a first place in a competition—five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pounds!" Miss Trant was genuinely astonished. She could not imagine Mr. Tipstead winning a prize of any kind, let alone one of five hundred pounds.

"Five hundred pounds," said the wife, with mournful pride. "Sparklets they were—funny little bits of sayings, you know. He'd been trying and trying and better trying at it for months, filling in coupons and sending 'em up with a sixpenny postal order every time, till I said 'Oh, for goodness sake, Eric,' I said, 'you might think we're made of postal orders. You've wasted enough time and money on them things if you ask me,' I told him. I knew he was clever at them, but it seemed to me they only took the first they came to and gave 'em prizes and his were never at the top of the bag. Well, not two weeks after—it was a Tuesday afternoon, two young fellows came, one with a camera, and told us he'd got the first prize. They took our photographs—'Mr. and Mrs. Tipstead receiving the cheque from our representative' they called it—and they put in a long piece about how pleased we were and what we were going to do with the money and all sorts. I wanted him to buy a bigger insurance book with it or move into a bigger shop, but no—he wouldn't have that, and of course I couldn't say anything. He'd won it, not me. So he must cut a dash with it, buys that car outside there, some new suits of clothes and one thing and another. And what with getting all this money and having his photograph in the paper and what he said and having a car, it just turned his head. 'Lord Tipstead' they began calling him down in the town, Willy told me; taking him off, you see—though there was a lot of jealousy in it, if you ask me. And

of course all these silly girls began making a fuss of him—they've nothing better to do now, girls haven't. Then this one comes along—regular home-wrecker, she is, from what I can see, the sort you'd think you'd never come across off the pictures. Don't you think this butter tastes funny, Miss Trant?"

"It's margarine. I can't eat it."

"I don't blame you. You ought to have another of these cakes. What was I saying? Oh, I'd finished, hadn't I? You really must excuse me, Miss Trant, it's so strange meeting you like this and I'm that bewildered today I hardly know what I'm saying. If you met me ordinary times, you wouldn't know me."

There was no reply to this, so Miss Trant put a question instead. "Have you any children?"

"I haven't. Not that we haven't wanted them, me especially, and it's been a great trouble to us. Perhaps it's as well as things are turning out, though you wouldn't be so lonely, would you?" She choked a little, coughed into her handkerchief, drank some tea, and looked tearful.

"Won't you have another cake?" This was very inadequate but it was the best Miss Trant could do at the moment.

"Well, do you think we might halve one between us, I really couldn't eat a whole one. No? Well, I won't bother. I'll finish this and then we'll go. Yes, when you're treated like this, you don't know whether to feel glad or sorry you haven't any children, you really don't. And when I think what I've done for that man! There's nothing I haven't done for him. I've given him my whole life."

These phrases came out too glibly, they were not from the heart, but from the newspapers and the penny novelettes. If Miss Trant had liked the little woman less, she would have let them pass, but now she felt she couldn't. "You know, I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Tipstead, and I'd like to help if I can. And you mustn't think I'm unsympathetic if I say that I never understand what that phrase means—about giving your whole life, you know."

"If you'd been a wife, Miss Trant, you'd know soon enough."

"Well, I haven't, of course. I've only been a daughter. But do you mean that all the time you've been married you've been sacrificing yourself, never enjoying the life you had together or anything?"

"I've enjoyed nearly every bit of it," cried Mrs. Tipstead warmly. "I know Eric's had his faults—a bit extravagant and silly—thoughtless, you know—but you couldn't want a better husband. I won't say we've always had the best of luck—we haven't—but we've enjoyed ourselves, I can tell you."

"You wouldn't have preferred being single, then?"

"Single! Me!" she cried in horror. "Living by myself, nobody to look after, nobody coming in and out, no bits of jokes and bits of comfort! I may have had a lot to do for him, but I've never begrudged it, never, except just lately perhaps, brushing his coats and ironing his trousers so that he could go out and meet that—that—fat painted barmaid. You needn't ask me that, Miss Trant."

"Then you really haven't given your life, you know. You've been living it just as you wanted to live it all the time. I mean, I don't see what more you could have done with it. You don't mind my saying this, do you?"

Mrs. Tipstead shook her head, then was silent for a minute or two, struggling through into honesty. When at last she spoke, her voice sounded different; it was quieter, more sure of itself. "It's a funny business, isn't it? I've thought a bit about it lately. And I see what you mean. If you do give a lot, it's only because you want to. But it's terrible when it's all thrown back in your face. You must wonder why I'm running after him like this. Of course I'm still fond of him—but I've got my pride the same as anybody else, and perhaps a bit more than most. But I know Eric, and I've nearly had trouble with him before. He's weak, Eric is, for all he's so clever and all that, and this woman's simply got hold of him and made him do what she wanted. He never wanted another wife, not he. He only wanted somebody to show off in front of, somebody who didn't know him like I did; he never wanted to be landed into this; and I'm sure he's miserable even now and he'll be worse tomorrow. If he can tell me to my face, he doesn't want to come back, that'll be different; I'll go away and never say another word. But he won't, you'll see."

"I'm sure you're right," said Miss Trant, remembering the uneasy little figure in the hotel.

"A wife knows, Miss Trant," Mrs. Tipstead observed earnestly. Then

she looked up and, with a startling change of tone, cried: "Well, Miss, I hope you're not going to charge us for butter when we've had nothing but margarine." And after wrangling with the waitress, she then proceeded to wrangle with Miss Trant, who wanted to pay the bill herself. Mrs. Tipstead did not want to pay it, she wanted to divide it scrupulously into two, and she had her way.

A few miles brought them to pleasant hilly suburbs and very soon they were threading their way towards the vast haze that was Sheffield.

III

Miss Trant sighed with relief. This was the street they were looking for, and though it was not far from the centre of the town, it had been very difficult indeed to find, and she was weary of stopping to ask the way, turning in crowded streets, dodging trams and lorries, all of which she had been doing for the last hour. It was a grimy and melancholy street, one of those that have steadily fallen in the social scale these last forty years, that begin by housing prosperous merchants and bank managers and gradually decline to the humble level of theatrical lodgings, corset agencies, palmists' consulting-rooms, and other and more dubious enterprises. The other end of the street, not far away, was blocked by a high wall. They had stopped the car a few yards round the corner, and now looked down the street, wondering what to do.

"Look," cried Mrs. Tipstead, pointing. "Isn't that it? It's just like this."

The car stood outside a house about halfway down on the left; it was the only one in the street. Miss Trant was sure it was hers. What a pity she couldn't take it without a word! But some explanation was necessary, of course. Perhaps she could get it back without being involved in the affairs of the Tipsteads.

"Hadn't I better go first?" she asked. "I shall have to see your husband, of course. What's the name of this woman?"

"If you mean her second name, I don't know. It was just Effie on the letter. So far as I can see and from what Willy said, everybody in the town just called her Effie. They would, wouldn't they?" Mrs. Tipstead added vindictively.

"Well, I simply refuse to go up to that house and ask for Effie." She

thought for a moment. "Perhaps you had better go first and enquire for your husband."

"No, that wouldn't do. I'll tell you what. I'll get out here and wait a bit. You drive right up to the house and ask for Eric—Mr. Tipstead —you see, and I'll—I'll—come in later on." She was very excited now.

After some hesitation, Miss Trant agreed, though she did not understand what Mrs. Tipstead intended to do and could not imagine her waiting outside in the street very long. She drove up to the house, discovered that the car really was her own, with all its luggage there just as she had packed it in that morning, then knocked at the door, not very loudly because she suddenly felt quite uncomfortable, almost guilty, as if she were a spy. This feeling did not last long, however, and as nobody came she gave the door, which did not look as if it had had any attention from anybody for years, a good sound rapping. Then she noticed there was one of those old-fashioned bells that have to be pulled out. She gave it a little tug, but it did not move. She gave it a hard tug and immediately fell back with about a yard of wire in her hand. At that moment, of course, before she could release the wire, the door was opened.

"Good evening," said the man who had opened the door. He had a thick husky sort of voice.

"Good evening," gasped Miss Trant, feeling very foolish. She let go of the bell handle and it hung down absurdly, at the end of its yard of wire.

"You've had a bit o' bother with that, have you? Out of date, you know, out of date. All electric now, isn't it? You can't stir for it," he observed amiably. He was a stout elderly man with a prominent reddish nose, an expanse of grey-bristled jowl, and a pair of spectacles pushed up to his dampy forehead. One hand clasped a newspaper, and the other, now that the door was open, replaced in his mouth a short clay pipe. He wore neither coat nor collar, was lax in the matter of buttons, and altogether was a figure of unlovely ease.

"Is Mr. Tipstead here, please?"

He took out his pipe to think this over. "Tipstead? Tipstead? Nothing to do with the Bird-in-Hand Friendly Society, is it? 'Cos that's two doors down. We're always getting 'em here."

"No, it hasn't. I was told Mr. Tipstead was staying here. He took my car by mistake, and I've got his."

The man's eyes grew rounder, then one of them gave her a wink. He leaned forward. "Our Effie's chap, you mean," he whispered. "I've heard about that car. Didn't know his name was Tipstead, though. 'Eric' she calls him. 'Eric or Little by Little,' I said, right off. And he didn't like it, neither. Come in."

No sooner had Miss Trant followed him into the dilapidated little hall than the large blonde herself, Effie, bounced out of a back room, crying "Who is it, Unkerlarthur?"

"Half a minute, half a minute! You'll soon know." And Uncle Arthur ushered Miss Trant into this same back room, a rather small and dark apartment that contained a bewildering assortment of small tables and knick-knacks and fretwork brackets and photographs. Among these, not unlike a knick-knack or piece of fretwork, was seated Mr. Tipstead, nervously pulling at a cigarette.

Miss Trant addressed herself to him at once. "You probably remember me. I was lunching at the next table to you this morning. You went off in my car——"

She could say no more. Mr. Tipstead sprang forward excitedly, and he and his Effie began explaining at the top of their voices. They continued for several minutes, first one of them taking the lead, then the other, correcting one another as they went along. But it was Effie who concluded the explanation. "And so we found your name and address on one of the bags and were going to write this very minute, weren't we, Eric, to tell you how it had happened, and Eric was going to offer to drive it back for you, weren't you, Eric, to make it all right, and we'd sent a telegram to the hotel to ask about his car, you see, because that was left behind and somebody might have got it, hadn't we, Eric?"

"Your car's outside."

"Outside!"

"Yes," Miss Trant went on, 'I came up here in it.'

"Thank God!" cried Effie, blowing hard. She had dropped the manner she had assumed at lunch, probably finding it too great a strain in such a crisis, and was clearly now her own natural self, dramatic, voluble, vulgar.

A weak smile lit up the face of Mr. Tipstead, who still had that vague hunted look. "Well, that's a bit of all right. And thank you very much, Miss—er—Trant. That's it, isn't it—Miss Trant? We got the name right, you see. And we can just change over now, can't we? Drive it all right? Yours was O.K. It's the same bus, you know, but a bit newer than mine."

"Just fancy!" And Effie's eyes, which were her best feature and looked quite bright under her thickly pencilled lashes, travelled from Mr. Tipstead to Miss Trant, from Miss Trant to Unkerlarthur, who was leaning against the door, puffing at his little clay, and enjoying every moment of the scene. Gaiety itself, Effie invited them all to fancy with her. "You've no idea what a load you've taken off our minds," she told Miss Trant. "It was just spoiling everything, wasn't it, Eric?" She smiled hugely at that gentleman and threw an arm about his shoulders. It was a fine solid arm, coming out boldly, imperially, from the short sleeve of her lilac silk jumper, and it seemed to announce at that moment that it was ready to protect an Eric it contrived to diminish from all the trials and assaults of this world. Mr. Tipstead wriggled a little in its embrace.

"Now then, Miss Trant," Effie continued, "do sit down and make yourself at home. And Unkerlarthur, if you're going to stop in this room, you'll have to go and put a collar and a coat on and make yourself look respectable; we're not just by ourselves now. Aren't you playing at the theatre this week?"

"I am that." And Uncle Arthur blew out his cheeks, sent his hands sawing backwards and forwards, and, in short, gave an excellent imitation of a trombone player. "Pom-pom-poppa-pom. Pom-pom-poppa-pom. It's a musical comedy—*The Girl in the Garage*—this week—augmented orchestra—so I'm in. You'll soon be rid o' me. I'll have to go and change soon." And he gave Miss Trant, who had turned to look at him, a prodigious wink. We know, don't we?—the wink said to her.

Miss Trant did not know, but she smiled at him. She liked Uncle Arthur, somehow, and the thought that he was one of those mysterious creatures who creep from under the stage and sit so coolly, blowing or fiddling away, in their little deep trench, gave her a thrill. She had

always been fond of the theatre—the whole enchanted absurdity of it—and had never been able to go often enough.

"I'm sure you must be tired, Miss Grant," Effie continued. "Now do sit yourself down and make yourself at home."

"I won't, if you don't mind. Now that we've settled which car is which, I think I'd better go." And it occurred to Miss Trant, when she had said this, that she had not the faintest idea where she was going.

Effie looked really disappointed, almost aggrieved. "Oh, but after coming all that way and bringing Eric's car and us taking your car nearly all the day and you coming right out of your way like this! We can't let you run away like that, can we, Eric? Hello! What's the matter with you, Eric? No, don't interrupt him. He's thought of something, thought of it deep down in his little head, all by himself, and he'll tell us if we'll keep quiet a minute."

This was badinage heavy enough to make an elephant wince, but it had no effect upon Mr. Tipstead, who still stared at Miss Trant, with his round little mouth open. "I've just been trying to work it out," he said at last, giving his weak laugh. "This is what I can't understand. How do you come to be here, Miss Trant? This address wasn't on any of the bags, was it?"

"I've no idea," replied Miss Trant easily. "I never looked at the bags."

"Well, I never did! I never thought of that." Effie looked from one to the other. "You just came here and we'd got your car and you'd got ours and I never thought any more about it. Well, how did you know we were coming to this house? Hello! What's that?" There was a repeated knocking at the front door. "Unkerlarthur, go and see who that is."

"It's somebody come to put the rent and rates up, 'cos he's seen two cars standing at the door," remarked Uncle Arthur, with a waggish glance all round. They could hear him chuckling down the hall.

"Well, you don't mind us asking, do you," Effie pursued, "but really it does seem funny, doesn't it, you coming here——"

Mr. Tipstead held up his hand. "Half a minute," he said, listening. Then he rose to his feet, a very shaky little man. There was a sound of voices in the hall.

"What's the matter? Who is it?" cried Effie, now looking alarmed.

"It's her," said Eric in a very small voice. It really seemed as if all his colour had ebbed away; he was obviously terrified.

Mrs. Tipstead marched into the room, a little figure but compact, charged with energy, all bristling. She halted, gave a quick glance at the astonished Effie, then surveyed the shrinking figure of her husband. "Well, Eric, I've followed you, you see."

Effie made a last desperate attempt to carry off the situation with a high hand. "Here," she cried, "who told you to come in here? What do you want?"

Mrs. Tipstead was fully equal to the situation. The question presented her with a magnificent cue. "What do I want?" she cried. She pointed to the wretched Tipstead. "That's what I want. My husband."

"O my God!" groaned Uncle Arthur at the door, and he promptly shut it and left himself on the other side.

"Now then, Eric," his wife continued briskly, "I'm not going to argue with you here. You can take your choice here and now. Just make up your mind whether you'll stay here with this woman or go back to the shop with me. One or the other. And it's the last time, mind."

"Eric, no; you wouldn't, would you, Eric!" As she shrieked this out, Effie looked as if she were about to fling herself bodily at poor little Mr. Tipstead, who would certainly have gone down like a ninepin. He shrank back, moistened his lips with his tongue, and looked utterly abject.

"Not after all you've said, Eric," moaned Effie, who was rapidly going to pieces.

"You be quiet and leave him alone," commanded Mrs. Tipstead. "Let him make his own mind up."

There was a silence.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Tipstead.

Eric looked up, looked down, cleared his throat, swung one foot, cleared his throat again, swung the other foot, then made a sound that bore no resemblance to any known word.

There was another silence.

It was Miss Trant who broke it, shattered it completely, Miss Trant, who had no business to be there at all. At the sight of Tipstead standing there, so dumb, so abject, a kind of angry shame had begun to take

possession of her mind, had pricked and then at last gored her until she could bear it no longer.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, say something or do something!" she cried to him, stamping her foot and beating her hands together. "Don't stand like that. Do have some courage, and either go or stay. Anything, anything but this! It's—it's—absolutely vile." She was too excited to be surprised at herself, though this was perhaps the most astonishing speech she had ever made.

He said nothing but at last he did something. Slowly, with bent head, absurdly, pitiably like a small boy in deep disgrace, he walked to the door, opened it, and went out. He was going back home. Without saying a word, his wife immediately followed after him. The two left behind never moved. Effie stared at the open door, her lower lip hanging foolishly. A few moments later, Mrs. Tipstead marched in again.

"He'd left his hat in here," she announced. She picked it up from the sideboard, flashed a smiling glance at Miss Trant as she passed, and went out, this time closing the door behind her. There came the sound of a car being started outside in the street.

Before Miss Trant could do anything at all, Effie suddenly became alarmingly active. She ran to the door and then came running back again, crying "Oh, he's gone, he's gone. I've lost him, I've lost him"—or something that sounded like that. With a fine gesture of despair, she flung one arm along the mantelpiece and knocked over a large pink vase. Perhaps the hideous cheerfulness of this object enraged her, for now she picked it up and hurled it into the fender, instantly smashing it to pieces. Then she threw herself into the armchair and burst into a storm of tears, sobbed and sobbed, her whole body shaking and her feet drumming on the floor.

It was an alarming spectacle. Effie was no chit of a girl but a woman on a very generous scale. The room did not seem large enough for such convulsions. It was incredible that they could have been set in motion by Mr. Tipstead. "In another minute," Miss Trant thought, "she'll be in hysterics," and saw herself trying to hold Effie down as she had once had to hold down a maid at home. She was annoyed with herself for not having gone before this, but on the other hand she felt she could not go now, not at this moment. "Don't, don't!" she cried, and moved

a step or two forward, with the intention of doing something. But she did not know what to do. The usual consolatory little actions seemed absurd, like trying to give a pat or two to an earthquake.

"Now what's up here?" Uncle Arthur was puffing and blowing before them, looking from one to the other. "Has that chap gone?" he asked Miss Trant. "I thought I heard him. Nay, lass, bear up, bear up." He gave his niece an affectionate slap or two on the shoulder. "You're well rid of him. He was nowt but twopennorth o' copper. Nay, lass, take it easy, take it easy."

Effie refused to take it easy. Violently she shook herself free from his hand, drummed her feet on the floor again, and cried louder than ever.

"Well, you must have it out, I suppose," he observed philosophically. Then he glanced at the hearth. "Gone and smashed an ornament and all," he said to Miss Trant, lowering his voice and speaking confidentially. "Can't help it, you know. Temperament, that's what it is. We've all got it; runs in the family. If we're up, we're up, but if we're down, we're down. It goes with talent, you know, and it's always been the same i' this family. Her mother—she was my sister—could sing *The Volunteer Organist* and such like and make a whole club-roomful cry—but if she were cross, she'd raise the roof, break anything. And her grandfather—my father, you see—was the best euphonium-player the Old Dyke Band ever had—I've known 'em come fifty miles to hear his *Death o' Nelson*—but if he didn't want to play, he wouldn't play, you couldn't make him. It wasn't beer, you know," he added earnestly, as if to arrest the thought that surely must be uppermost in his listener's mind. "He liked a drop, but it wasn't that. It was temperament. It runs in the family. I'm a bit that way myself. But I'll have to be off." He was dressed for the theatre now, for he was wearing a very old dress coat and waistcoat, a queer turned-down collar and about an inch of black tie. He caught Miss Trant's surprised glance, and winked at her. "Ar," he remarked complacently, "I know what you're thinking."

"Do you? Well, what am I thinking?" Miss Trant was amused.

"You're thinking 'He's gone and forgotten to change his trousers,' that what's your thinking."

Miss Trant laughed. "Well, as a matter of fact, I was." And with

good reason, for he still wore the same trousers he was wearing before and they were blue.

Uncle Arthur winked again. "What the eye doesn't see, the heart won't miss," he observed. "I'm only on duty, you might say, from the waist up, and I could wear a kilt or clogs and it'ud make no difference you see. You notice next time you're at the theatre, and you'll see what I mean."

Effie was being overlooked and so she stopped crying, to exclaim indignantly: "That's right, Unkerlarthur, go on, don't bother about me! Standing there talking about trousers and kilts! And look at me!"

"Well, you feel a bit better now, Effie lass, don't you?"

"No, I don't." And to prove it she began again.

"Well, I must be off," he said hastily.

"And so must I," said Miss Trant.

"No, no, Miss Grant," cried Effie, "don't leave me to myself. I won't be responsible if I'm left to myself, I won't really. Don't go."

Uncle Arthur stared at Miss Trant in pained surprise. "Nay, miss, have a heart. You're not busy, are you? Well, stop on a bit and keep her company."

"Nobody wants me, nobody," moaned Effie.

"Course they do, Effie lass," said her uncle heartily. "Miss Dent here will stop and look after you a bit. I'm off then! Be good!" He gave Miss Trant a last wink as he went out.

Effie sniffed a little, then began to dry her eyes. "I'll bet I look a sight, don't I?" And undoubtedly she did. "Do sit down and make yourself comfortable. I don't want to keep you here if you've anything to do, of course, but I wish you'd stay a bit. There's nobody here, and if I'm by myself tonight, I shall get the jimjams, what with all the excitement there's been today and the state I've been in this last week and the way he went off just now. If Unkerlarthur hadn't been working at the theatre this week, he'd have stayed with me—he's a good sort is Unkerlarthur—and this is really his house; well, really, me and my sister Elsie and him we all join of it, and we let rooms to theatricals, you know, as well, because my family has always been connected with the profession, and I went on the stage for a time and then had to leave, it was too bad for my nerves, and Elsie—she's younger than me and

very talented—she's still on, doing concert party work, you know." All this came out in one unbroken torrent while she was still dabbing her eyes and patting her hair. How she contrived to say so much and say it so quickly, having apparently been in hysterics two minutes before, was a mystery.

"Now, Miss Grant——" Effie began again.

"Trant," the lady put in, correcting her.

"Oh, you must excuse me. Of course it's Trant, isn't it. I had the name right at first, and then what with one thing and another—— Did you catch my name? Longstaff, it is." She stood up and examined herself in the mirror. "First thing I must do is to tidy myself up a bit. I'll just slip upstairs, if you don't mind. Take your hat off, Miss Trant, and rest yourself properly. What about a cup of tea and something to eat?"

"It's awfully kind of you," said Miss Trant, who was really touched by this show of hospitality. She was not merely an intruding stranger, she was the villain of the piece, for had she not brought Mrs. Tipstead to this very door? It was clear, however, that Effie was anxious to keep her there, probably because she needed a listener more than usual this melancholy evening. "But I had tea, you know, some time ago," Miss Trant went on. "And I really don't think I want any more, thank you." She took a sensible interest in food, and had already begun to wonder about dinner.

"Ah, that's afternoon tea, you mean," said Effie, "but we go in for high tea in these parts, though as a matter of fact in this house supper's the big do, and I'll tell you why. You see what with Unkerlarthur being at the theatre and then us letting rooms to the profession, none of them really wants anything solid till the shows are over, about half past ten to eleven, that's the time when they want a proper set-to, and so Mrs. Moore—that's the woman that looks after the house—goes away in the afternoon and then doesn't come back till about nine or half past and then cooks something hot for everybody, you see."

"That's a very queer way of living," said Miss Trant. "I don't understand how anybody sleeps after that."

"They don't, you know, not early. But they can stay in bed in the morning. And they couldn't have a solid meal just before the show.

Take these we've let to this week—I've not seen them but Unkerlarthur told me they were here again, and they've been here before—the Four Romanies—acrobats, you know—you'll probably have seen 'em—they're a good turn—well, if they'd their dinners at night and then went on to do their show, they'd have to be taken to hospital in ten minutes. And even Unkerlarthur has to wait. I've heard him say many a time 'Give me a good plateful of steak and kidney pudding and you just might as well push a cake of soap up the old trombone.' Can't play, you see, after that."

"I see. But you needn't wait, eh?"

"Oh no, not at all. They weren't expecting me, anyhow, tonight. That's why I say let's have a bit of something now. I could nip out for something in a minute. Just rough-and-ready, take-us-as-you-find-us, you know."

Miss Trant was not anxious to take them as she found them. "Look here," she said, "won't you come out to some hotel and have dinner with me? And by the way, I can't possibly leave Sheffield tonight. I must find an hotel to stay in tonight, and I must go and put my car away too."

"With having these Romanies here—though one of 'em's only a dwarf —you never saw such a little man—we're rather full up, though I dare say I could squeeze you in here somewhere——"

"Don't trouble, thank you," said Miss Trant earnestly. The thought of being squeezed in there was too much even for her new adventurousness. "Probably you can take me to some hotel where I can stay and we can have dinner too."

"I'd love that," cried Effie enthusiastically. "It's very nice of you, I'm sure, and if it's not saying too much, I don't mind telling you it's just what I need a night like this, I mean having a little friendly outing. Hello!" She broke off, and listened. "Front door again. Hope it's somebody for the Bird-in-Hand this time. I'm getting nervous." She giggled uneasily, departed, only to return the next moment with a telegram in her hand. "It's for Unkerlarthur. What's he doing with telegrams? Here, I'm going to open this. It's all in the family." She did open it and, characteristically, read it out at once. "Here, listen to this. *Show bust all stranded send other basket passenger train also three*

pounds anything wheres Effie. Elsie. Well, I don't know! What do you think of that?" She stared at Miss Trant.

"I don't think anything of it," replied Miss Trant, "because I don't understand it. What does she mean?"

"She doesn't know I'm here, you see," cried Effie excitedly. "And I'll bet anything she rang up Lichfield to tell me, and they told her I'd gone, they didn't know where. Rawsley this is from. I knew they were at Rawsley all last week. It's just like her, too, sending a long telegram like this—over a shilling, you see. It's a funny thing those girls have always got money for telegrams, doesn't matter how broke they are. They never write, nobody on the stage ever writes."

"Yes, but what does it mean?" Miss Trant was now so curious that she was quite impatient. These little glimpses of that mysterious world behind the painted scenes excited her.

"Well, don't you see, the show's suddenly busted—she was with a concert party, pierrot troupe, you know—and they're all stranded. The old business. No salaries for a few weeks, then one morning the manager or the fellow that's running it isn't there, and they're all up a gum tree. That's what happened to them at what's its name—Rawsley."

"Where's that?"

"It's somewhere in the Midlands, not above thirty or forty miles from Lichfield. That's all I know. I never heard of it before. It's one of these small towns, you know, that some concert parties try out when they've finished a season at the seaside. And now she wants her other basket sending on, by passenger train, you see, so she'll get it in good time, and a pound or two to get her out of the place. Some mangy old ma's probably claimed her basket till she gets paid for her rooms. I'll get that basket—it's got all her other props in—off in the morning, and if Unkerlarthur's got a spare quid or two—'cos I haven't—I'll post that on too, first thing."

"You've got her address, of course?" Miss Trant did not enquire out of mere politeness; she was really interested.

Effie looked blank. "Well, if that isn't just like her! She sends a long splathering telegram and never puts her address in it."

"Can't you send it to the theatre?"

"They've not been showing at a theatre because there isn't one at

Rawsley. It's one of those holes where you do three nights at the Corn Exchange or all next week at the Assembly Rooms. Don't I know 'em! Nowhere to dress and all draughts and the curtain never works. It'll have to go to the post office, that's all, and take its chance—I mean the money. The basket'll have to go to the station. It's what I call a mess. Here, I'm going to tidy up, and then we'll go out and talk about this after. Won't you come up?"

"No, thanks. I might as well wait until I get to the hotel and then I shall have my things."

"All right. I shan't be long. You have a look at our photos."

The walls were covered with photographs, and Miss Trant spent the next quarter of an hour examining them. It was like catching a glimpse, in a peepshow, of another world. There were photographs of large ladies in tights, massive Dick Whittingtons and Prince Charmings, or small ladies in ballet skirts or pierrot costume. There were photographs of gentlemen in evening dress, in battered hats and monstrous-check trousers, in nothing at all but leopard skins and laced boots. Niggers and fairies and tramps and pierrettes stared out with the same wide impersonal smile. Nearly every photograph had not only a dashing signature, followed by a brief but imposing description of the writer—*Leading Comedian in 'Hot Times', Principal Girl 'Mother Goose', Starring in 'The Doodahs',* and so forth—but also flung out, with a prodigality of exclamation marks, some such message as *Heaps of Love!* or *All the Best!!* It was impossible not to believe that the subjects of these photographs were not living in a whirl of success; they seemed to smile out of a glittering triumph. Only by making an effort could Miss Trant realise that these radiant creatures might be stranded in little towns and be reduced to spending their last shillings on S. O. S. telegrams. But she was aided by the sight of a post-card, crammed with broad grins and frills and pompoms, sent by Elsie herself, now so forlorn at Rawsley. It was all curiously fascinating. Here was a world that seemed as far away and fantastic as any of those she explored so eagerly in her favourite fiction, that of the embattled Huguenots or the Young Pretender, and yet it was only just round the corner. Indeed, she had one foot in it at that moment. That was an exciting thought, and though she laughed

at herself a little, nevertheless the foolish little thrill of it remained, like a tune going on somewhere at the back of her mind.

Then Effie bounced in. Miss Trant had hoped that Effie would depress her evening's toilet to the level of this disastrous day. She looked forward to seeing an Effie more cheerful in mind but far more subdued in appearance. Actually, however, Effie was now more flamboyant than ever; her hair was a wilder gamboge; her eyebrows and lashes were astonishingly blackened and her mouth was a fiercesome daub of vermilion; her dress was a vivid green; and she carried an imitation Spanish shawl that promised to be the final catastrophe.

"I don't know whether to wear it or not," she mused. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't wear it if I were you," Miss Trant counselled earnestly. She was relieved to find that her companion immediately and quite meekly put the shawl away. It was soon apparent, however, that Effie had made her final onslaught upon the day's melancholy upstairs in her room; she had called up the last reserves from her wardrobe and dressing-table and had gained a brief victory; but that now she could do no more. Her appearance was hardily triumphant, but her manner became more and more subdued. When the car had been put away, the room secured at the hotel, and they sat down to dinner, Effie chattered no longer. Over the soup she looked as wistful as it is possible for a person so large, so bright of hue, to look when eating soup. After that she became sentimental, confidential. She would not talk of Elsie or Unkerlarthur; her thoughts were with Mr. Tipstead.

"I didn't think any of him at first, you know, Miss Trant," she confided mournfully. "Thought he was a little swanker. He kept coming in and there was a bit of talk about him because he'd won a prize in one of these competitions. But that got nowhere with me, I can tell you; and I'm used to admiration and men saying silly things, what with being on the stage and then hotel work; they all run after you, you know, or pretend to, just to pass the time. But he kept coming in and coming in, and we got to exchanging bits of jokes, you know; and he'd make me laugh sometimes. You wouldn't think he was droll, would you?"

"I shouldn't," replied Miss Trant promptly and with decision.

"Well, he is. But that was nothing. I've met 'em far funnier than him—make a cat laugh, some of the fellows I've known would. Then,

one day, I was walking round in the afternoon—off duty, you know, and nothing much to do—and he comes along, and we go for a bit of a walk and sit down, and he asks me about my life, where I've been, and all that, and then he tells me all about himself, how he's married and it's all been a mistake and how his wife doesn't understand him and won't think about anything but making money——"

"I must say I think that's nonsense," Miss Trant put in. "I should think she understood him only too well. But men always say that, at least they always do in books and plays."

"Well, in real life, they'll say anything for twopence, that's my experience. And we'll always believe 'em. At least," she added, with a sudden gleam of sagacity, "we'll believe 'em if they tell us what we want to believe. Anyhow, that started it. I felt sorry for him, and he said how sorry he was for me—and you can do with a bit of sympathy when you've had nothing but a row of great fat fellows all talking silly round the bar every night. And then all of a sudden—quicker than catching 'flu—he got a real fascination for me; couldn't keep my mind off him. I'd have gone anywhere, any time, to see him. But you know what it is."

"I'm not sure that I do," Miss Trant replied, with some hesitation. There came, unbidden, to her mind the thought of a tall Scots ship's doctor, a deep voice, a glint of hair about prominent cheekbones. Hugh McFarlane. How queer to think of him now! But then, hadn't she suddenly thought about him the other day, when Mrs. Chillingford had told her that Dorothy was engaged? It was time she forgot about him. She knew less about him now than she did about—Mr. Tipstead. Yet, really, that was queer, too. She hardly noticed what Effie was saying. Something about her being pretty. The word startled her into attention.

"Pretty!" she cried. "Don't be absurd. I'm not pretty, and never was."

"My words but you are!" exclaimed Effie in all seriousness. "And don't think I'm flattering you, either, 'cos I never flatter anybody—that's not my way. Course you're pretty. I only wish I was half so pretty. You've got lovely hair and eyes and teeth—they're your own, aren't they?—and nice features and a nice slim figure. Mind you, Miss Trant—if you'll let me say so—I don't think you make the best of yourself. Your style's too quiet—of course, it's ladylike and all that, but you can have too much of the ladylike, if you see what I mean."

Miss Trant did not see what she meant, or did not choose to see. Effie told her and produced, among other things, what she called "some tips and wrinkles you won't find in any of the books of words," and this she did with great precision and fluency but still with a certain melancholy, as if life were all over for her and she was only shouting a few last messages to the fading shore. Most of this advice Miss Trant instantly decided to ignore, not having any desire to look like a human oleograph, but now and again she heard something that left her more determined than ever to take stock of herself. Indeed, she was all eager attention, having been started into it by the initial compliment. Elizabeth Trant of the Old Hall, Hitherton-on-the-Wole, was sitting in the dining-room of an hotel in Sheffield with a barmaid, a large, loud, and badly painted female who had failed that day to capture another woman's husband; and because she had just been told she was pretty, Colonel Trant's daughter was pleased and excited at once, perhaps better pleased and more excited than she had been for years. Hitherton would never have believed it.

Was it this conversation, was it the sight of those photographs in the sitting-room, was it merely a sudden lack of interest in cathedrals, at Liverpool or elsewhere, or was it a combination of all these things that made Miss Trant offer her services? She will be seen arriving at other decisions but at none really of greater importance than this, which is of such moment indeed that everything related up to now has been a mere overture to it. It came easily enough, and as usual with nothing to indicate that here was a little lever that might move whole worlds. Effie had returned to the subject of Mr. Tipstead, whose sun was still setting with her; then she had passed rather mournfully to talk of herself and her own prospects, and hinted at trying the next day for a place in a certain gentlemanly bar in Sheffield, where apparently she might be able to piece together a broken heart; and finally and momentously she arrived again at her sister Elsie, waiting in Rawsley for her basket and some money. It was then that Miss Trant made her offer.

"If you like, I'll take them down for you tomorrow," she announced quite calmly. "No, it won't take me out of my way because really I haven't got a way. I was going to Liverpool to see the cathedral but I'd much rather go to Rawsley and see your sister."

Effie agreed with enthusiasm. It was arranged that Miss Trant should call at the house next morning for the basket and whatever sum Unkerlarthur might be able to raise at such short notice. There would be no difficulty, Effie pointed out, in finding Elsie in a town of that size, where everybody knew everybody else's business. She launched upon a description of Elsie that soon became a bewildering biography, and at last Miss Trant had to cut her short, pleading that she was tired and would like to go to bed early. That was quite enough. Instantly, Effie was for rushing her upstairs at once and putting her to bed with her own hands, and by the time Miss Trant had excused herself from any such treatment, she was tired indeed.

The day had been so long, so eventful, so cluttered with other people's lives, with Tipsteadery, that it seemed to press upon her now, a weight and huddle of experience not to be borne without some little respite of darkness and quiet. Thus it was a relief to see the last of Effie, now almost tearful again and threatening huge embraces, to meet the chill emptiness of the hotel bedroom, as impersonal as a packing case, to slip out of the day altogether, after having crowned it with a little gesture of one's own. In short, Miss Trant did not regret her change of programme, and slept well.

IV

Thus it was that she found herself, on the Thursday afternoon, on the road a few miles from Rawsley. Behind, on top of her own bags, was a theatrical basket, the property of Miss Elsie Longstaff, and in her handbag was a letter from Effie and an envelope in which she had seen Unkerlarthur place a dirty pound note and an equally dirty ten shilling one; all he could muster. She had hinted that she could lend Elsie some money herself, but Unkerlarthur had insisted on sending this thirty shillings. It had never occurred to Miss Trant that she, a stranger, was being trusted with these things, and neither Unkerlarthur nor Effie had pointed out this fact or shown the least hesitation; all of which says something for the company we are keeping.

The rain that had driven Mr. Oakroyd under the trees had compelled Miss Trant to put up the hood of her car. With the first appearance of the sun, she had stopped to take down the hood, and this time had

stopped altogether. The car refused to start again. She cranked away until she was breathless and aching. She pressed the self-starter until at last it would not even make a noise. When she was not attending to one or the other, she was hopefully flooding the carburettor. It was useless; the engine would not start, never even gave a promising little cough or splutter. She looked wistfully at its mysterious pipes and wires and cylinders. "How absurd these things are!" she told herself. "It looks just the same, exactly the same as it does when it's going, and yet it won't go." There was nothing for it but to wait until some one came along who knew more about the interior of a car than she did. As the roads now are crowded with people who know all about such things, her position did not make her feel uneasy. The road to Rawsley, however, was singularly deserted that afternoon. Ten minutes passed and brought not a soul. Then a little figure came into the struggling sunlight. And this, of course, was Mr. Oakroyd walking into his adventure.

When he came closer, Miss Trant noticed that he was carrying a bag of tools and, of all things, one of those absurd little basket trunks, and the very smallest she had ever seen. When he came closer still, she noticed that this sturdy middle-aged workman had a broad pleasant face and eyes of bright blue. His brown cap was on the back of his head and looked too small for him, and this cap and the ridiculous little basket trunk made Miss Trant want to laugh. What she did do, however, was simply to smile at him and to ask if he knew anything about cars.

He did not raise his cap, he did not touch it in salute, but he pushed it further back on his head. In this way he contrived to give the lady some sort of salute and also keep his independence at the same time. "Well," he replied to her question about cars, "I do and I don't, as you might say." And he smiled back at her, his face wrinkling pleasantly in the sunshine.

"I wonder if the 'do' part of it would apply to this car, because I can't make it start, you see. I wonder if you'd mind having a look at it. I'm sure you could do something with it." Miss Trant had great confidence in all men who carried bags of tools about with them, and would have been surprised to learn that joiners usually know very little about internal-combustion engines.

"What I mean is this," he went on, following his own thoughts stubbornly. "I've nivver driven a car i' my life. Cars as cars has nowt to do wi' my job. But where I've been working, they've a lot o' lorries and I've spent many an hour watching t'lads set 'em to rights, so I've picked up a bit about 'em. Nar do you understand me, Missis—I mean, Miss?"

His caution, his broad North-country speech, and certain whimsical details of his appearance all delighted Miss Trant. "I see. But I'm sure you could find out what's wrong with it."

"I might and I might not. You can nivver tell wi' these things. I'll have a do at her, though. Nar what have you done so far?" And he listened to her tale of cranking and petrol flooding with the deep solemnity of a man about to take over a job. When she had finished, he remarked: "I'll bet it's either t'plugs or magneto. She won't start if her plugs is mucky. We'll have a look at 'em."

Cheerfully he set to work, first pulling out the car's tool box, then unscrewing one plug after another. "They're none so bad," he observed, "but we'll give 'em a bit of a rub up while we're on t'job."

It was while he was giving them his bit of rub up that the sky suddenly darkened. From the massed clouds in the West there came a vague roll or two of thunder, and the next minute there was something more than a mere shower, there was a downright pelter. Mr. Oakroyd hastily covered up the engine and then helped Miss Trant to raise the hood. "Come inside and shelter," she cried, climbing in. After a moment's hesitation, he followed her, and there they sat together, looking through the wind-screen at the downpour, a very queer pair indeed.

"Eh, I've left that basket o' mine out," he exclaimed, and brought it in. "I've all my clothes i' that, an' they wouldn't dry so quick once they'd gotten sopped through."

This last remark was made, in his excitement, in a brogue so broad that Miss Trant could hardly understand it. "I'm sure you must come from Sheffield," she said, after a pause. "I was there last night." This nice little man reminded her of Unkerlarthur.

"Nay, I don't," he replied, apparently in some surprise. "I belong many a mile off Sheffield. I came from Bruddersford. Nar, I'll bet you've heard o' Bruddersford, haven't you, Miss?"

"Yes, that's where they make cloth, isn't it? But that's in Yorkshire too, surely?"

"Ay, I should think it wor. It's more i' Yorkshire ner Sheffield. You couldn't have owt more Yorkshire nor Bruddersford. An' I've lived there all my life, except for a bit when I was down South, till this week."

"And where are you going to now?"

"Eh, I don't know. I was just going to have look round this Rawsley place today, but I don't rightly know where I'm going."

"I'm rather like that, too, at the moment," Miss Trant remarked. The parallel amused her.

"I nobbut set off o' Monday night," he continued, a trifle dreamily. "And what is it now? It's nobbut Thursday, isn't it? Well, it seems like months sin' I was i' Bruddersford, I've done that much and seen that much these three days. I'm fair capped wi' mesen. It's like being one o' these chaps on t'pictures. And nobbut three days!"

Miss Trant could have clapped her hands, just as she used to do when she was a little girl and as she had never thought of doing for years. "But how queer!" she cried. "I've been just like that too. I've been away since Monday and all kinds of things have happened and I feel as if I'd been away months and was quite a different person. Don't you feel that too?"

"I do an' all." He was as delighted as she was.

"Do tell me all that's happened to you," she commanded. "But tell me your name first."

"Oakroyd's my name. It's a right old Bruddersford name."

"And mine's Trant, and that's an old name too, in Gloucestershire. And now you must tell me all your adventures since Monday night. I'm sure you've had adventures, haven't you?"

"I have that. I've had so many, I don't fairly know where to start. It'll tak' a bit o' time."

"Never mind about that, Mr. Oakroyd. It's raining hard and we can't do anything until it stops, and I want to hear all about it."

After some hesitation, he told the whole story, with Lily and his wife and Leonard, the twenty pounds and the dismissal, the lorry the Great North Road and Nobby and the Kirkworth Inn, the caravan and Joby Jackson and the fair and Jim Summers, in short, with everything in it.

Miss Trant, who occasionally asked questions and insisted upon all the details, enjoyed it all and decided that Mr. Oakroyd himself was adorable. In return, she told him enough to prove that she was really a fellow adventurer. Then the sun came out again to brighten the last spatter of rain.

"Nar we'll have a do at them plugs," said Mr. Oakroyd, who liked to push on with a job once he had put his hand to it. His "do" was crowned with success, for the car started easily. Miss Trant waved him back to his seat, and they moved towards Rawsley. The town began, as so many small towns do, with a railway station, and on the opposite side of the road, about a hundred yards further along, was a corrugated iron hut labelled "Mounder's Station Refreshment Rooms." Miss Trant's eye was caught by a pink bill pasted on the wall of this hut, near the doorway. She pulled up, then got out to examine the bill. It told her what she wanted to know: *The Dinky Doos,* in their Musical Medley of Fun and Frolic, were to be seen, it proclaimed, in the Assembly Rooms, Rawsley; and among the promised attractions were "the Dainty Numbers" of Miss Elsie Longstaff.

While she was reading this notice, a middle-aged woman appeared in the doorway. Perhaps she was Mounder herself, for she had the mournful resignation of one doomed to be encased in corrugated iron and to serve station refreshments.

Miss Trant turned to her. "Can you tell me if these people"—she pointed to the notice—"are still in the town?"

Mrs. Mounder immediately folded herself up, her arms, her face, her whole body, being compressed at once, so that she seemed the very image of bitter stoicism. "Yes indeed they are," she replied grimly. "They're in here."

"What! Do you mean they're in there now?"

Mrs. Mounder shut her eyes, put her lips away altogether, and nodded her head so violently that the whole of her seemed to rock slightly. "Came an hour ago, six of 'em," she said at last, "and ordered one pot of tea and one plate of bread-and-butter, and they've asked for two lots of hot water already, and some of 'em's eating what they brought themselves. And sitting there jabbering away and ordering me about! They'll get no more hot water I can tell you," she added, looking sternly

at Miss Trant, as if to anticipate that lady's request that they should be given still more hot water.

"Oh, what a shame!" cried Miss Trant, remembering their plight.

"You might well call it that, Miss. If everybody went on like that, I couldn't keep a door open."

"No, I was thinking about them," said Miss Trant, boldly correcting her.

"Them indeed!" Mrs. Mounder sniffed. "Don't you worry about them. They've impudence for anything, they have. We've heard about them."

"Well, I'm coming to see one of them, and I'll have some tea too." She turned away to invite Mr. Oakroyd, who was still sitting in the car, to have some tea with her. At this moment, however, two men, looking rather bedraggled, approached the hut, and in the narrow space between the road and the doorway there was hardly room for the three of them. The men stepped back to let her pass, but as they did so, the one in front, a fair youth with a wild lock of hair and no hat, called out to Mrs. Mounder: "Good afternoon, Madam. Have you Dinky Doos here?"

It sounded as if he were an officer of health enquiring about some infectious disease. Miss Trant smiled as she hurried past them. She heard the second man cry: "Lead on, Jollifant," noticed that he carried a large flat case that looked as if it contained some musical instrument, and wondered if they were theatrical people too. They disappeared into the Station Refreshment Rooms. Then Mr. Oakroyd, a little diffident, followed them, and Miss Trant, who had returned to her car for her handbag, was last of all. In the doorway, she lingered a moment and heard an astonishing clatter of tongues coming from the inner room. "I'm quite excited," she told herself happily.

Chapter Six

INIGO MEETS A MEMBER OF THE PROFESSION AND TURNS PIANIST

I

We left Inigo Jollifant hurrying away from Washbury Manor in the darkness of Monday night. We have just seen him arrive at the Station Refreshment Rooms in Rawsley on Thursday afternoon. In order to understand how he came to be there at all, we must know what happened to him during those three days, or, to be more precise, those sixty-four hours that began at 12.30 A.M. on Tuesday.

Then it was that Inigo decided that Fauntley had been right. He ought to have gone to bed. The night was not warm enough and certainly not light enough to make walking very pleasant, especially after a long day of French and History and birthday celebrations. He ought to have drunk more Rob Roy or less. As it was, Rob had played him false, for after conjuring him out of the school, out of his bed, he had not stayed with him and kept him glowing inside but had gradually dropped behind, and now, at the end of half an hour's walk, had slunk away altogether. A little more Rob or a little less, and he would have been in bed now. So Inigo argued, and incidentally entertained himself, as he walked the last half mile or so of a familiar side-road that linked Washbury to the world. When he came at last to the main road, running north and south, he was back again in the world, but there was little of it to be seen as nothing was happening in it. He turned to the right, then spent the next minute wondering which of the faint points of light was the North Star, and the next ten minutes wondering about stars in general. It was, as usual, a cheerless meditation. If you are going to bother about these things, he decided, you have to turn astronomer, to weigh them and measure them, out of sheer self-defence.

A rumble that he had heard behind him for some time turned at last into a lorry. This was the first vehicle he had seen on the road. He turned round and gave a shout when it came near. It pulled up, but the driver seemed dubious when he was asked for a lift.

"It's all right," said Inigo, "I'm on a walking tour."

That was sufficient. The driver realised at once that a man on a walking tour is an enemy to nobody but himself and may safely be given a lift.

"But I can't take yer far," the driver shouted as they rumbled on again. "About ten mile and no more. That's where I finish. I live there, yer see."

"Where?"

"Near Dullingham. And I'll tell yer what. Yer can get a train at Dullingham Junction. Yer wouldn't think it but yer can. It's the only place for miles and miles where yer can get a train at this time o' night is Dullingham Junction."

"Splendid!" cried Inigo at the top of his voice. The lorry appeared to be full of suits of armour carelessly packed. "I like to hear that. You wouldn't imagine anything ever happened at a place with a name like that, would you? Dullingham Junction! Where do they go to, these trains?"

"I dunno. Up Lincoln and Grimsby way or Doncaster way I dare say, but I don't rightly know. I've never been on 'em but there's a feller I know, feller called Harry Briggs, works at the station and I know he's on duty at night for this train. Always late too, he tells me. I'm not sure he isn't on this week."

"I'd like to have a look at this station."

"That's right," roared the driver. "I'll put yer down close to it." And then he went on to shout of other matters, the chief of them being a very awkward journey he had just made to Northampton, and he so often demanded agreement that Inigo, who felt that he ought to be sympathetic, made himself hoarse before the ten miles were covered.

At last the driver pulled up and pointed. "There y'are. See them lights. That's Dullingham Junction. Yer just go down that bit o' road and yer there. See if it's Harry Briggs."

The road curved down sharply to the station. As he descended, Inigo

could see the signal lights, the faint gleam of the metals, and a dim yellow glow from somewhere in the station itself. His spirits drooped at the sight. There was something very melancholy about Dullingham Junction. The wide night itself was somehow not so cheerless as this half-hearted attempt to drive it away, this sad glimmer of light. It was so quiet too. He could not imagine a train ever arriving there. The usual cheerful railway bustle seemed as remote from this little station as Paddington itself. He began to ask himself what he was going there for, whether it would not be better to return to the main road, and about twenty yards or so from the entrance he stopped and leaned against the wooden rail at the side of the road. Dullingham Junction only confirmed his opinion that he was indeed a young ass.

Perhaps he would have turned away (and walked out of this chronicle altogether) had he not heard a most astonishing sound. The sound itself was pleasing and its unexpectedness, its daft incongruity, were ravishing. He listened in delight, telling himself that he had judged Dullingham Junction too hastily. It was saying that he was not a young ass, that this is still a world in which midnight exits may be rewarded, that he has not everything who has bed and breakfast. Somebody in Dullingham Junction was playing the banjo.

If this was Harry Briggs, Inigo decided as he drew nearer, then Harry Briggs was wasting his time in the service of the London and North Eastern Railway, for this banjo was not being fumbled with but was being *played*. The night retreated hastily before its impudent twanka-pang, twanka-pang. Tired as he was, Inigo found that his feet itched to break into a double shuffle. If the station had been crammed with grinning coons, buried under melons and cotton blossoms, he would not have been surprised.

He walked through the booking office, where only one tiny light was burning, and onto the dim and empty platform. The banjoist, now in a happy fury of syncopation, was obviously in the waiting-room. Inigo peeped in through the half-opened door. At one side of the little fire was Harry Briggs or one of his colleagues, a young man with a round red face, and at the other side, sprawling on the seat, was the banjoist himself. One was so busy playing and the other staring and listening,

with his mouth wide open, that Inigo stood there several minutes without being observed.

With a final and triumphant wag of his head, the banjoist concluded his performance. "How about that, my boy?" he cried, holding up the banjo as if inviting it to share in the applause. "You've heard that? Now where are you going to hear the next like it? Can I rattle the old banjo or can I not?"

"You can that, Mister," replied his audience earnestly. "My word, you've got a touch, you 'ave!"

"You've said it. I have got a touch," the banjoist remarked with dignity. His utterance was rather thick and there were other indications that he had been refreshing himself very generously earlier in the night. Apart from this thickness, however, his voice was peculiar. It was a curious, harsh drawl, and though he could not be said to have a definite American accent, nevertheless his accent was not quite an English one. It was so unusual that it excited Inigo's curiosity.

"You 'ave got a touch, and I don't care where the next one comes from," his listener went on, enthusiastically if a trifle vaguely. "What about giving us just another, Mister? 'Ere, do you know *'Er 'Air was Golden?*" And, fixing his gaze sternly on his companion, who looked rather startled, the railwayman sang very slowly and solemnly, with the most lugubrious portamentos, the following ballad:

Errair was go-olden on the day
She gave 'er love too mee-yer,
And though it's long since turned too gray,
We're still in sympathee-yer.
And 'and in 'and ——

But here he was interrupted.

"No, no," cried the banjoist. "No, don't know it. And between you and me, stationmaster, it's not quite my style. A little too heavy on the sentimental side, too much heart massage, for me, a matter of taste, you know, a matter of taste."

"Ar, ar, I like a good ballad."

"You like 'em tender and trew, I can see that," said the banjoist, with a droll glance. "That's because you stay up so late by yourself, waiting

for the midnight express. Did you ever see *The Midnight Express*—the drama? I played in it once for three nights in Montreal!"

Inigo chose this moment for his entrance.

"Hallow, hallow!" cried the performer. "What's this?"

The railwayman jumped to his feet, looking startled, and was then annoyed because he had felt frightened for a moment or so. "'Ere, what's the idea?" he demanded angrily. "Coming creeping in like that!" Then, having taken a good look at Inigo, he moderated his tone. "Beg your pardon, but you made me jump. What is it you want?"

"I want a train," replied Inigo, though up to that moment he had not really thought about trains.

"Oh, you want the 1.20, eh? Where do you want to go to?"

"Where do I want to go to? Now that's rather a puzzler. Let me see," Inigo meditated. "Well, what about Stockport?"

"Stockport! You can't get to Stockport on this line."

The banjoist now took charge of them. "Stockport," he repeated, rather condescendingly. "Ever been to Stockport?"

"Never set eyes on it," Inigo told him.

"Then my advice is—don't bother. There's nothing there, not at all. I know it well, my boy. I've been there; I've been everywhere. If you do go, you ask 'em. Ask 'em at the *Red Lion* if they don't know me. They'll remember me all right. Morton Mitcham, that's my name. They'll remember Morton Mitcham." And he stood up, perhaps to show exactly what it was they would not be able to forget. He was certainly not a person who would be easily forgotten. He was tall but very thin, and his clothes, a light check, merely hung upon him. There was a Shakespearian cast about the upper part of his head, for he was bald on the crown but had very thick dark hair at each side, bushed about his ears. His eyebrows were immense and dramatic; his nose boasted a fine curve and a rather richer colouring than the rest of his face; his long upper lip and his long pointed chin were blue; his slightly hollow cheeks were blue below and brown above; and indeed his whole face had that curious parchmenty look that comes from exposure, at some time or other, to hotter suns than this country ever sees. His collar and tie reminded Inigo vaguely of Tenniel's Mad Hatter. Altogether, Mr.

Morton Mitcham was an unusual person; his appearance was as puzzling as his accent, oddly combining the tropical planter, the tragic actor of the old school, and a rather down-at-heels senator from one of the remoter states of those that are united.

"I was listening to you playing the banjo," Inigo told him. "And by jingo, it was good too. It's a rattling good instrument played like that."

"It is. But it's a difficult instrument, let me tell you. Yes, sir. It's good, as you say, when it's played like that, but how often is it played like that?"

"Ar," said the railwayman fervently. "That's right."

Mr. Mitcham fumbled in a waistcoat pocket and finally brought out about an inch and a half of dusty cheroot. "Indian cheroot," he explained. "There's nothing to beat 'em once you acquire the taste. I had twenty boxes of the very best given to me once when I was up at Bangalore. I never knew who sent 'em, didn't know a thing. 'To Morton Mitcham Esquire from an admirer'—that's all it said, on a plain card. Woman's handwriting, though. I've one or two of the boxes still, in there." He pointed to a very large and disreputable bag on the seat. "I've carried 'em round ever since. But no cheroots in 'em. Ha, ha!" Nor did it seem likely that he had any stock of cheroots with him, for the one he was lighting now had evidently been smoked before. He began putting away his banjo in its case. "You a musician?" he enquired of Inigo.

"I play the piano from time to time."

"A professional?" And he raised his immense eyebrows.

"No, a very ordinary amateur."

"Ah, pity!" Mr. Mitcham lowered his eyebrows, but did not condescend to explain why it was a pity.

Inigo suddenly remembered the chocolate and biscuits that Daisy Callander had given him, and now he brought them out, inviting the others to eat with him.

"You're a traveller, a campaigner, a trouper, my boy, I can see that," cried Mr. Mitcham approvingly, helping himself and carefully extinguishing the cheroot. "Give me a few biscuits and some chocolate and a few bottles of whisky, rye for choice, and I'll face anything. Blizzard,

shipwreck, anything. I once lived for a fortnight on nothing else, up on the Black Hills between Wyoming and South Dakota——"

"South Dakota!" Inigo's cry was ecstatic. The man must really have been there because you couldn't *think* of South Dakota, couldn't just lift it out of some mental map.

"Yes, South Dakota. There were two of us. Let me see, what was that fellow's name? Ah, yes—Sheerman. He was an ex-Wesleyan minister who'd been running a quick-lunch bar down in Denver. Hardest winter they'd known for forty years, and the two of us walked right into it."

"Have another biscuit," said Inigo enthusiastically.

"Thanks, my boy, I will. Of course we'd whisky there too, any amount of it. Perhaps you're thinking whisky wouldn't shake down with biscuits and chocolate, but let me tell you, they're fine together. If you've got a flask with you, just try it."

"Sorry, but I haven't."

"Always carry a flask," said Mr. Mitcham severely. Then he turned to the railwayman, who was demolishing a gigantic sandwich. "What about that tea you were talking about, stationmaster?"

The other mumbled something in his sandwich. Evidently he was dubious now that there were three of them.

"You're not Harry Briggs by any chance, are you?" Inigo asked him.

He was Harry Briggs; admitted the fact with delight, and insisted upon Inigo explaining exactly how he came to hear of him. When the identity of the lorry driver had been fully established, Harry Briggs at once changed his attitude towards Inigo, who felt he was now regarded almost as an old Dullinghamian. His round red face beaming at the thought of what coincidence could do, Harry Briggs set to work now to make some tea.

Mr. Mitcham fastened the straps of his banjo-case. "Just a little hobby of mine, you know," he remarked airily, tapping the case. "But it's most useful; made the evening go all over the place. 'Ask Morton Mitcham to come in and play his banjo,' they'd say. Guest nights at Residencies, you know, and that sort of thing. I've played to at least half a dozen colonial governors in my time, and they simply ate it, simply ate it—all except one and that was old Lord Stennenfield."

"What was the matter with him?" asked Inigo. "No soul?"

"Deaf as a post, couldn't hear his own brass cannon going off. And the best bridge-player east of Alexandria, they used to tell me. That's what he wanted, you see. 'Get the card tables out,' he shouts, right in the middle of my performance. I walked straight out. You can't do that to Morton Mitcham."

"Quite right," murmured Inigo. "You're an artist, sir, I can see that." And he saluted him with a stick of chocolate.

"Well, I've been told so. I've been asked to give lessons by a colonial governor. I'll give you his name—though this is in confidence, gentlemen." And he looked sternly at Harry Briggs, who was standing open-mouthed, with a kettle in his hand. "It was Sir Elkin Pondberry. 'Damn it all, Mitcham,' he said to me, 'you'll have to teach me how to play that thing.' 'Very proud, Sir Elkin,' I told him, 'but it can't be done.' 'Damn it all,' he said, 'it must be done.' 'It would take years,' I told him. 'Then you'll have to stay here years,' he said. 'I'll have you kept here, Mitcham, damned if I won't.' 'Can't be done,' I told him, 'I'm catching the next boat up to Bangkok.' And he had to give in. But I told him about Stennenfield—they were meeting at Singapore very soon—and showed him how to deal himself four aces and four kings. 'Damn me if you're not a genius, Mitcham,' he said when he'd got the hang of it. 'I'll try that on old Stennenfield.' And he did, and it was the great joke that year in all the clubs out there. I heard about it up at Hongkong."

"Hongkong!" cried Inigo, who was feeling rather dazed. "You've held the gorgeous East in fee, absolutely. But what about those aces and kings? You're not a conjuror, are you?"

"Not exactly a conjuror. I've never bothered about illusions and the mechanical trick acts, you know. But sleight of hand's a hobby of mine. I think I can do most things with a pack of cards."

"You've got a heap o' talent, if you ask me, mister," said Harry Briggs, who had now made the tea. "I wish I'd only got a bit of it. You wouldn't catch me 'ere. You've got a touch on that there banjoey, my word! 'Ere, 'ave a drop o' tea. One'll 'ave to 'ave the cup and other the saucer."

"It passes the time, it passes the time," said Mr. Mitcham, and with an apparent absence of mind, he took possession of the cup, "I've found these little accomplishments useful now and again on my travels, and polished 'em up a bit as I went along. I learned a trick or two in the sleight-of-hand business from an old Chink I met one time in Shanghai, and then another time one of the Frenchified niggers you get in New Orleans showed me one or two things I didn't know about playing the banjo when I was down there. Though one of the best players I ever heard—in a class right above all these New York jazz-band men, and, mind you, I've heard them all—was an old Irishman I struck down in Sydney."

"There's a cousin o' mine there," Harry Briggs put in eagerly, "same name as me, except he's Jim, and he drives a van for a laundry. You might 'ave come across 'im."

"What, Jim Briggs of the laundry!" cried Mr. Mitcham, with a wink at Inigo. "I knew him well. He told me he'd a cousin down here. 'Look him up,' he said, 'if you're ever at Dullingham Junction.'"

"That was clever of 'im, seeing that I've only worked 'ere six months and it's two or three years since we 'eard from 'im. You can't pull my leg, mister."

"Well, it's fifteen years or more since I was there," remarked Mr. Mitcham imperturbably. "I've been all over since then. I'm a wanderer over the face of the earth, I am, my boys. I've only been back in the Old Country two years, just looking round, you know, visiting a few old friends."

"Ar, a gentleman o' leisure like, now," Mr. Briggs observed with respectful envy.

"You've hit it," said Ulysses, in his queer harsh droll, now American, now English. Once more he brought out the stub of cheroot, this time a very small and dusty stub, lit it, and blew out clouds of smoke in a manner that contrived to suggest leisure, a rich indolence, a return at last from innumerable and astonishing journeys round and round the globe.

"Heureux qui, comme Ulysse à fait un beau voyage," said Inigo, who was wondering how this incredible personage had ever been able to land

himself at Dullingham Junction in the middle of the night. It was really surprising that he had been able to find this small island of ours at all.

"That's right, my boy," he replied condescendingly. Then he yawned. "What about that train of yours?"

"Should be 'ere this next half-hour," said Harry Briggs, slowly turning himself into a railway official again. "She's an hour late tonight. I'll just 'ave a walk round." And he lumbered out.

"I don't know whether I shall bother catching it," said Mr. Mitcham, settling himself down on the seat. "I'm going on to Nottingham, just to see a few old friends, you know. But I might as well wait until the morning now. I missed a connection down the line."

"Did you?" yawned Inigo. "Where was the place?"

"Um—I don't remember." For once, it seemed, that unusual memory of his had failed him.

Inigo had a suspicion that Mr. Morton Mitcham had not missed any connection. Mr. Morton Mitcham was a very unusual person, either a great traveller or a great liar. Inigo decided that he wanted to see more of him.

What he did see, however, was Mr. Tarvin. He and Mr. Tarvin were struggling through deep snow up a hill, and when they were halfway up, Mr. Tarvin stopped and looked round, saying "All this is South Dakota then. Chumha. Just call the boys, Jollifant," and he called the boys, though there were none to be seen. But the next moment they were there, a whole crowd of them, making the most extraordinary humming noise. It made Inigo so angry that he shouted at them, but they made more noise than ever. Then he stared so fiercely at the nearest boy, young Withington, that he stared himself out of South Dakota altogether, back again into the waiting-room, where Mr. Morton Mitcham was sleeping with his mouth wide open and snoring prodigiously.

Inigo stretched himself out at full length on the seat and used his knapsack as a pillow. He listened to the snores for a minute or two, then slipped away again, not into South Dakota this time, but into oblivion. There he stayed, though once or twice it seemed as if the darkness and quiet were being mysteriously invaded, as if there were alarms and skirmishes on some distant frontier.

II

Somebody was shaking him. He opened his eyes, to see a black moustache, large and badly trimmed, and it annoyed him so much that he closed his eyes again. "Now then, sir, now then!" it said.

Inigo did not feel called upon to reply.

"Time you was moving if you want the 6.45," it went on.

This remark was so extraordinary that it opened his eyes again. The waiting-room looked quite different in the morning light. He stared at the porter. "Where's Morton Mitcham?" he asked.

The porter shook his head. "'Tain't on this line. I never 'eard of it."

"It's not a station but a man. He was sitting there last night, talking about banjos in Bangkok and conjuring in Singapore. Unless I dreamt him."

"I shouldn't be surprised. I'm that way myself," said the porter earnestly. "Let me 'ave a few or a bit o' tinned salmon last thing, and I'm off, all night. The stuff I've seen! Banjos and Singapore's nothing to it."

"I don't know that I care for Old Rob Roy," Inigo mused. "He's split my head open and left a sort of dark brown taste in my mouth, as if I'd been chewing some of his Highland peat. But look here, where's what's-his-name—wait a minute—Harry Briggs?"

"Ar, now you're talking! You didn't dream *'im,* I can tell you. Went off duty a bit back, he did. You missed the 1.20, didn't you? Going North, aren't you, sir?"

"Am I?" Inigo thought it over. "I suppose so, but before I go anywhere I want a bath and a shave and some health salts in a tumbler of tepid water and then some tea and toast. And perhaps an egg—you never know—one of those young and tender eggs, the little brown ones. Now," and he produced a shilling, "what do you think about that programme?"

"Thank you, sir. Well, what I think is you'd best get on to Grantham on this next train. Dullingham's no good to you, I give you *my* word. Get anything you like at Grantham, anything you like." And the porter smacked his lips at the thought of this roaring metropolis.

So Inigo went to Grantham. He sneaked through the early morning

sunshine to the *Angel and Royal,* where he slipped into a bathroom before most of its guests had looked at their early cups of tea, and had to keep several of them at bay because he stayed so long luxuriating in nakedness and warm water. By the time he was fit to appear at the breakfast table, he was ready for anything it had to offer. After breakfast he smoked his pipe and stared, in a rather dreamy fashion, at several newspapers, and it was halfpast ten when he finally took the road.

It was only because he was the prospective author of *The Last Knapsack,* that prose elegy of pedestrianism, that Inigo chose to walk out of the town, which offered him innumerable trains and buses. Walking did not seem very pleasant that morning; the day was warm already; the westward road was dusty and never free from motor traffic; and he did not feel inclined to exert himself. It was better when at last he was able to turn down a side-road, which brought him, after many a corner that seemed alarmingly like a blank end, to a small red-brick inn and bread and cheese and beer. There was nobody to talk to at the inn, for the landlord evidently had other work to do during the day, his wife had so little time to spare that she appeared even to serve the beer under protest, and there was no company; but Inigo lingered there until two o'clock, in a dreamy reverie. When he sauntered on again, skirting fields of stubble and bright but decaying woods, the beer within and the sun without conspired to make that reverie dreamier still.

He did not know where he was or where he was going, and he did not care. He drifted like a leaf down the vacant lane. The whole burnished afternoon was only an idle fantasy. "I move among shadows a shadow," he told himself over and over again, for his mind was a shining jumble of quotations from the more melancholy anthologies. Here everything was golden, and nothing real perhaps except the dust. "Golden lads and girls . . . come to dust." That was how it went, and that too he repeated with swelling vowels that sent little shivers of pleasure down his spine. He came at last to a place of exquisite shade and peace, where the lane turned into a narrow road and great branches hung over a grassy space at the corner. It was a place where a man could meditate or perhaps sleep for an hour. But some one had left a little car there. There was plenty of shaded space on either side of the car, but the sight of it, suggesting noise and fuss, kept Inigo standing

where he was. The car spoilt the place. He looked at it in disgust. Then he looked at it in astonishment. He went nearer.

Yes, there it was. Along the bottom of the wind-screen was a notice printed in bold crimson letters: *Take heed for the end draweth nigh.* In the rear compartment were a number of placards, two or three feet square and printed in even bolder crimson letters. Inigo did not scruple —for clearly this was no time for scruples—to take out two of them. *And the stars of heaven fell upon the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken by a mighty wind. And the heaven departeth as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.* Then he turned to the other, which said: *And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabiters of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!* He carefully replaced the placards and stretched himself on the grass by the side of this strange apocalyptic little car.

It was very quiet. The few sounds there were, a distant creaking, a vague twittering, were so remote that they might be coming from another world, another life. He stared out of the shade about him into the shimmer of green and gold beyond. The whole afternoon had been insubstantial. Now it all seemed little more than so much painted silk, quivering at a breath. It's fragility hurt him; he closed his eyes. But the ground he was resting on was solid enough, and the blades he pulled were the old sweet blades of grass. He opened his eyes again. The car itself, though a little battered, had very definite substance. He noticed that it had been fitted quite recently with a new set of tyres. Inigo juggled idly with the thought of these tyres. Perhaps the prophet who owned the car bought them because he expected to be still running about in his car when the cities were sheets of flame and the mountains were fading like smoke. He might run right through Armageddon in it. That would be a record indeed; a non-stop run into the new heaven and earth. And all the journalists and advertising men, poor ghosts, biting their spectral lips because the very last edition had been printed, sold, withered away, long before! These fancies made Inigo feel more comfortable, though there was still a little hollow place, as hollow as the

world without, inside him. He yawned, shut his eyes, wondered who owned the car, then fell asleep.

He awoke about an hour later, sat up, and discovered that the owner of the car was there, fussing with it. For a minute or two, Inigo could only blink at him, but he decided that the man looked disappointingly unprophetical. Their eyes met.

"Hello!" cried the man. "Do you think I disturbed you? I must have done, mustn't I? But you weren't here, were you, when I first came? It's very warm this afternoon, isn't it?" He spoke in rather high chanting tones, and as he spoke his whole face beamed. He was a man about forty, and he had curly auburn hair damply clustered about a somewhat lumpy forehead, gold spectacles, prominent cheek-bones, a small curling moustache, and too many teeth. He was very neatly dressed in a dark blue suit and a black tie, and there was something vaguely evangelical about his appearance.

"I don't think you disturbed me," Inigo replied, "and it doesn't matter if you did. It's stupid to fall asleep like this, gives you a headache—but I was awfully tired." And he yawned.

The other flashed his spectacles at the knapsack. "You've been walking, haven't you? I should think you're taking a holiday, aren't you? What splendid weather we're having, aren't we? Perhaps you're going about alone, are you?"

"I wander lonely as a cloud, absolutely." Inigo struggled to his feet.

"Ah, I recognise that, you know," cried the other enthusiastically. "That's Wordsworth, isn't it? About the daffodils, isn't it? A beautiful piece too, don't you think? Now you're probably not feeling like walking, are you? I wonder if I could give you a lift. I'm going on to Oxwell. Do you know it? Are you going that way at all?"

"To tell you the truth," said Inigo, "I don't know where I'm going. I'm just wandering about for a day or two, on a kind of holiday."

"That's splendid, isn't it? Though, mind you, I don't envy you because the work I am doing—and it takes me all over the country—is better than any holiday, much better. Do you know what I'm doing. Of course you don't. I'm organising secretary to the Second Resurrectionists. Perhaps you're a Second Resurrectionist, are you?"

"No. I'm not even a First Resurrectionist. I'm afraid I never heard of them before."

"Is that so?" The man's face clouded for a moment, then brightened again. "But there, you have now, haven't you? I thought you might be one because we're holding one of our special gatherings tonight at Oxwell, and I thought you might be on your way there. I'm going there myself, but I told you that, didn't I? Yes, the special meeting for all the East Midland district—including both Ephraim and Gad——"

"Ephraim and Gad!" cried Inigo. "What have they got to do with it?"

"Ah, that puzzles you, does it? You recognise them of course? Well, I must explain, mustn't I? One moment, though. I must tell you my name." He looked quite grave when he said this: "I'm E. G. Timpany." Then he smiled again.

"And my name's Jollifant, Inigo Jollifant—rather absurd, isn't it?"

E. G. Timpany held up his hand. "No, no, no. Not at all. You mustn't say that. I know the name. Yes, I do. A Mrs. Jollifant is one of our prominent workers in the South-Western district—that's Simeon, you know. Exeter is the headquarters of Simeon, and Mrs. Jollifant is, I believe, an Exeter lady. Yes, she keeps a teashop there. A relation perhaps?"

"I don't think so," replied Inigo. "But tell me about Gad and Ephraim, and why Exeter is in Simeon."

"We divide up our country as Jehovah divided up Canaan among the twelve tribes. I was the humble instrument of the command. At the Annual Convention, some one complained about the confusion between the various districts. Our President turned to me. 'Perhaps Mr. E. G. Timpany can suggest something,' he said. At that very moment, I heard a Voice. And the Voice said 'Look in your Bible.' In a flash, I saw what we were to do. 'Are we not the Children of Israel?' I said, for we believe that the great Anglo-Saxon race is descended from the ten lost tribes, just as the British Israelites do, only we have looked further into things than they have. 'We will divide up our territory as Canaan itself was divided,' I said." He stopped and took out his watch. "Time is getting on, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," said Inigo, disappointed. He did not want to lose Mr. E. G. Timpany.

"Now I want you to do me a favour, Mr. Jollifant. I'm sure you're an educated man, aren't you? Have you any profession?"

"I'm a schoolmaster of sorts."

"A university man perhaps?"

"Cambridge. A Third in French, and a History Special."

"A Special, eh? That's splendid, isn't it?" cried Mr. Timpany, whose notion of a Special was evidently quite different from that of the university authorities. "I knew, though, I knew. I could tell in a moment. You always can, can't you? Not that I'm a university man myself. I'm not. I'm self-educated. I left school when I was fifteen—a day school in Wolverhampton, it was—and all I've had since has been a Correspondence Course—on Accountancy, and very poor, I thought, not at all thorough—and some evening classes in Commercial Spanish. That was before I discovered the great teacher, Mr. Jollifant—the Bible, the common, everyday, beautiful old Bible." And he suddenly produced one from nowhere, like a conjurer. "I'm sure you're not one of these so-called higher critics, are you?"

Inigo truthfully replied that he wasn't, but tried to convey the impression that he might have been a higher critic if he had cared about that sort of reputation.

"But there I go, talking and talking away," said Mr. Timpany. "What I wanted to ask you, as a favour to *me* was to come with me to Oxwell. You'll be very welcome, Mr. Jollifant. There's a high tea at half past six—people coming from all parts, you see—and then a gathering afterwards. I want you to come simply as my guest, *my* friend, if you don't mind my calling you that, and I'm sure you don't, do you? Now what do you say? I'd like nothing better than to stay here and talk to you about some of our Second Resurrection truths, but—as you can see, can't you?—I haven't the time." And he smiled his wide innocent smile, with its flashing confusion of ivories, and passed a hand over his damp forehead and auburn curls.

There was no resisting this invitation. Inigo packed himself and his raincoat and knapsack (both of which found a place among the texts from *Revelations* at the back) in the little car, and off they went. They slowly chut-chutted down the winding lanes, crawled through

half a dozen villages, for Mr. E. G. Timpany was an excessively cautious driver, so that there was plenty of time for people to read the notice on the wind-screen: *Take heed for the end draweth nigh.* If such people grinned, as they frequently did, Inigo gave them a solemn and prophetic stare, but if they looked puzzled or startled—and one little girl and a man in a milk-cart really did look startled—he beamed upon them with the air of a man bringing glad tidings. His companion did not talk much because there were so many corners and crossroads and the like to be carefully negotiated, but from time to time he let fall some information about either the Second Resurrection movement or himself. So far as Inigo could gather, then and later, the Second Resurrectionists took their stand on some fantastic interpretation of the twentieth chapter of *Revelations,* believing that Satan was let loose, given almost unlimited powers, about 1914, when he instantly set to work deceiving the nations and gathering them together for battle, that worse was soon to follow, more and bigger battles, floods and earthquakes, fire out of heaven, all within the space of the next two or three years, after which the sea would give up its dead, the sun, the moon, stars, and the round earth would vanish like clouds, and there would be an end of all material things. In addition to this apocalyptic dream, there were astonishing theories about the ten lost tribes and the Great Pyramid. It was all very confusing, not unlike hearing somebody describe a nightmare. Mr. Timpany's own history, or such scraps of it as Inigo caught, seemed simplicity itself. The central fact in it was that he had sold what he called "one of the best insurance books in Wolverhampton" to devote the remainder of his life, three years at the most, to the Second Resurrectionists. When Inigo applauded such courage and faith, Mr. Timpany was very modest indeed, and pointed out that once he had come to believe in the Second Resurrection view of the future, it was impossible for him to remain in the insurance business.

"I wanted to talk to people about our S. R. truths," said Mr. Timpany, "and I felt it wrong to take their money, just as you would, wouldn't you? What was the use of my trying to persuade a man to take out a twenty-years endowment policy, a thousand pounds, we will say, with benefits at a premium of fifty-one pound ten, when I knew so well in my own heart that everything was coming to an end long before then?

The very last day, I remember, a man came to me because he wanted to take out an education policy for his two boys, and I had to tell him outright that his boys never would be educated, not as *we* know education, you see. It was the least I could do, wasn't it? It wouldn't have been honest to have gone on, would it? Not that I wanted to, but in any case it wouldn't, would it?"

Inigo thought this over. "I think it would," he announced at length, as gravely as he could. "After all, I suppose people only insure themselves to set their minds at rest, because they feel assured about the future. Well, they'd have had that, you see. And their future *is* settled anyhow, you believe. They'd really have had their money's worth, you see."

Mr. Timpany did not see, and they were at Oxwell before the question was settled. Oxwell proved to be a miserable little town, and Mr. Timpany explained that it had only been chosen as the scene of the gathering because one of the chief Second Resurrectionists in the district happened to live there and it was he who was providing them with the hall for the meeting and the tea. "Mr. Grudy is one of our old stalwarts, a strong character and very deep-thinking man," Mr. Timpany went on to explain, "entirely self-made and quite well-to-do. He's a farmer and corn-chandler and horse-dealer and several other things besides. Quite a patriarchal character, and one of our most substantial S. R.'s. I'd been taking a message to one of his married sons when I met you," he added, as if that somehow clinched the matter.

There were several cars, a trap or two, and a little bus standing outside the hall, a red-brick building of small size and less dignity that evidently served the town as a recreation-room. People, mostly women, were already buzzing in and out of the place, and Mr. Timpany, with a hasty excuse to Inigo, immediately dived among them and finally disappeared for some time, leaving Inigo outside, staring at the people and at the large notices that surrounded the door. These were even more fiercely apocalyptic than those in Mr. Timpany's car. In crimson lettering, bright as arterial blood, they announced a speedy end to all familiar things. *And in those days,* they screamed, *shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.* The Second Resurrectionists, all washed and brushed, stiffly

erect in their best clothes, passed in and out and shook hands, asked one another how they were and said they were quite strangers. Inigo moved nearer the door and was pleasantly assailed by the smell of freshly cooked ham. He remembered that he had had nothing since breakfast but a little bread and cheese. Yes, he was hungry. Then his eye was caught by the furious crimson of another placard: *Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.* He was also feeling very dirty and untidy.

"This is Mr. Jollifant." Mr. Timpany was beaming upon him once more. "Mr. Grudy."

"We are very pleased to see you here today," said Mr. Grudy in a very deep voice. There was certainly something patriarchal about him. He was a gaunt elderly man carefully dressed in black. His eyebrows were bushy, intimidating; his nose had a masterful Semitic curve; his long white moustache was not altogether of this world. It was a face you could see framed in the smoke of a desert sacrifice.

Inigo said he was very pleased too, and then took Mr. Timpany on one side and asked him about washing and brushing. Mr. Timpany remembered that Inigo would have to spend the night somewhere. He consulted Mr. Grudy, who advanced upon Inigo again. "There is room in my house for you tonight," he said. "You will stay with us."

Inigo, wishing he could reply in the same grand manner, could only stammer something about thanking him awfully, better not, lot of trouble, very decent, easily manage somewhere though, to all of which Mr. Grudy paid no attention.

"There is a place for you," he announced. "My wife is superintending the preparations for tea, but my niece shall take you to the house." And he stalked away, followed by Mr. Timpany.

Inigo waited for the tall bony female with the large nose, the daughter of Ephraim or Gad. To his astonishment, however, Mr. Timpany returned with a girl about twenty, all rosy and smiling, quite a pretty girl. And this was Mr. Grudy's niece, Miss Larch, the maiden of the tribe who would wait upon him. Inigo, an almost painfully susceptible youth, shook her hand enthusiastically and accompanied her to the house, which was only about quarter of a mile away, in the highest

spirits. There, it is true, he was handed over to an elderly woman, who showed him into a neat little bedroom; but when he had washed and brushed himself and returned to the hall, Miss Larch, still rosy and smiling, was waiting for him. He wanted to shake hands with her all over again. She wore a charming blue dress that gave place, at the knee, to silk stockings of a most admirable contour; the five freckles dotted about her small nose were delicious in themselves; she had large blue eyes, thickly fringed, and they seemed to twinkle when they were turned upon him. It was incredible that she should be a daughter of either Ephraim or Gad.

"You don't look a bit like a Second Resurrectionist," he boldly confided on the way back. And then, of course, he had to tell her what a Second Resurrectionist did look like, and drew a strong picture of a bony female that made her laugh. Didn't she look like that, then? She didn't, he replied with fervour, and left her more rosy and smiling than ever. But he too didn't look like one, she told him. He wasn't one. Then what was he doing there? He explained shortly, then drew from her an explanation of her own presence on the scene. She had lived there for the last eighteen months, Mrs. Grudy being her mother's sister, and she helped in the house and it was all very, very dull, though her uncle and aunt were very, very kind, but there was nothing really to do and everybody who came was either old or stuffy or both, and nobody talked about anything but the Bible and the lost tribes and the Pyramids, and sometimes she thought it was silly and then at other times she had to believe in it, they were all so sure about it, and then she felt she was awfully wicked and was a bit frightened, yes, awfully frightened sometimes. It all came out in one breathless rush, and it was evident that Miss Larch—Freda—had not exchanged confidences with anyone for a long time. By the time they reached the hall, they were not so much friends as fellow conspirators, for Youth, when it is exiled into the kingdoms of the old, at once turns itself into the strongest of secret societies. At the door, Inigo glanced meaningly at the crimson letters, and Freda glanced at them too. Then their eyes met.

The door was closed but they opened it softly and peeped in. Some sixty or seventy people were sitting at the long tea-tables. They were not eating but listening to Mr. Grudy, who was apparently concluding

an address from the platform at the far end of the room. He boomed on for some little time before Inigo could make out what he was saying, but his final quotation from the Bible he carried in his hand came clearly enough, and Inigo, peeping over Freda's shoulder, heard it with a sense of incredulity, as if all Oxwell were some fantastic dream.

"And it shall come to pass," roared Mr. Grudy, "in that day, that his burden shall be taken away from off thy shoulder, and his yoke from off thy neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing. He is come to Aiath, he is passed to Migron; at Michmash he hath laid up his carriages." Then, after a suitable pause, Mr. Grudy stepped down from the platform. "Let us have tea," he said in a milder voice, and instantly there was a babel.

"It looks as if we've come to Michmash, absolutely," muttered Inigo. Mr. Timpany had reserved a space for them next to him, but the table was so crowded and the others had been sitting there so long that not much of the space was left, for they were using long wooden forms and not chairs. Freda sat down, then Inigo jammed himself between her and Timpany, who was almost steaming. "Warm in here, isn't it?" he said to Inigo. "But a splendid gathering, really splendid!"

It may have been a splendid gathering but it was certainly a very odd meal. Inigo remembered other high teas but none higher than this. The forms were a solid mass of eaters and drinkers, and the tables were a solid mass of food. There were hams and tongues and rounds of cold beef and raised pies and egg salads; plates heaped high with white bread, brown bread, currant tea-cakes, scones; dishes of jelly and custard and blanc-mange and fruit salad; piles of jam tarts and maids of honour and cream puffs and almond tarts; then walnut cake, plum cake, chocolate cake, coconut cake; mounds of sugar, quarts of cream, and a steady flood of tea. Inigo never remembered seeing so much food before. It was like being asked to eat one's way through the Provision and Cooked Food departments of one of the big stores. The appetite was not tickled, not even met fairly; it was overwhelmed. The sight of these tables drove hunger out of the world, made it impossible to imagine it had ever been there. Inigo ate this and that, but he hardly knew what he was eating, he was so warm, so tightly wedged in, so amazed at the spectacle. The Second Resurrectionists were worthy of

the colossal meal spread before them. This highest of high teas had met its match. If they had all been forty years in the wilderness, they could not have dealt with it more manfully. They were not your gabbling, laughing eaters; they did not make a first rush and then suddenly lose heart; they did not try this and taste that. No, they were quiet, systematic, devastating; they advanced steadily in good order from the first slice of ham to the last slice of chocolate cake; and in fifty minutes the tables were a mere ruin of broken meats, the flood of tea a pale and tepid trickle. Inigo, who retired early from the conflict, though he had to stay where he was, with Mr. Timpany steaming on one side and Freda delicately grilling on the other, looked on with wonder and admiration. Across the table were two middle-aged women with long yellow faces, almost exactly alike, and a little round man who had no teeth and whose nose and chin came within an inch of one another as he worked away. It did not look as if three such persons would be able to do more than skirt the fringes of a high tea, but actually they walked right through and emerged unruffled at the other end. Above their heads, high on the opposite wall, was yet another of Mr. Grudy's crimson placards, which began: *And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee.* Inigo stared, now at the people, now at the placard. It was all very odd, absolutely.

Tea was over. Freda disappeared; Mr. Timpany was borne away by the daughters of Ephraim and Gad; and Inigo strolled outside to taste the air, which had a novel and delicious flavour. After that he smoked a pipe and sauntered up and down the road, keeping an eye on the door so that he should not miss the fair Freda. A few belated Resurrectionists, whose work had kept them from the last Grudy high tea but two that this world would know, hurried into the hall. Then a large car arrived and carefully deposited on the road several persons who evidently could not be expected to grapple with a high tea. There was a tremendous middle-aged woman, purple and commanding, who was attended, as such women so often are attended, by a thin depressed-looking girl in a frock she had never liked. There was also a tall man with an excessively long and lean and brown face and a military bearing. Inigo watched these three new arrivals sail, drift, and march into the

hall. Then he caught a glimpse of Freda's blue frock in the doorway.

"Well," he asked her, "when does the meeting begin?"

"In a minute," she replied. "The nobs have arrived. Did you see them? They won't come to the tea, they're too grand. That woman with the red face and the big nose is Mrs. Bevison-Burr, and that's her daughter with her—she never says a single word and wears the most awful clothes. And the man with them is Major Dunker. He's rather nice, but he's a bit cracked."

"Never mind. We're all a bit cracked."

"You may be," retorted Freda, "but I'm not——"

"I know what you're going to say next," he told her.

"You don't."

"I do. You were going to say 'So there!'"

"No, I wasn't," cried Freda. Then she made a little face at him, plainly asking for more. This was Freda's idea of conversation. After sitting in corners so long and listening to stuffy old people who said things that were either silly or downright frightening, to contradict a young man who smiled at her and had nice eyes—it was lovely. So Inigo exchanged a little more of this stuff—"sandbag badinage"—he called it—and had time to reflect that if she had worn steel spectacles or scaled three stone more, he could not have done it, would have been elsewhere. As it was, he too was happy, delighted with Freda herself, with the phrase he had just made, and with his own ironical reflections.

It was time, however, for the meeting, the gathering, the convention —whatever it was—to begin. The tea things had been cleared away, the tables moved back, and all the forms ranged in front of the little platform. Now Mr. Grudy, Mrs. Bevison-Burr, Major Dunker, and Mr. Timpany marched on to the platform and looked as if they were about to sing a quartette. Everybody else made a rush at the forms. Freda and Inigo were among the last, with the result that they had to squeeze in at the end of one of the back forms. Freda was jammed against a very stout woman, who smiled at her and patted her hand. Inigo was jammed against Freda and in order to sit there at all he had to hold on to the form itself, just at the back of Freda. There was really only half of him on the form.

Mr. Grudy stepped to the front of the platform and surveyed them with a benevolent patriarchal stare, as if he saw before him his shepherds and bowmen and handmaidens and flocks and herds. Then he lifted a hand. Immediately everybody leaned forward and covered their faces. Inigo was not sure what was about to happen, but he leaned forward too, with a sharp jerk, so that the arm behind Freda slipped up and landed somewhere in the neighbourhood of her waist. She shook herself and whispered something. "Sorry, couldn't help it," he began whispering, and at the same time, by a gigantic effort, contrived to remove the innocently offending arm. She gave him a fierce little Sh-sh-sh. Mr. Grudy was opening with a prayer. It was rather a long prayer, and Inigo was so uncomfortable, his body being twisted at a fiendish angle, that he found it impossible to listen to it. Nevertheless he was in sympathy with it, for Mr. Grudy continually referred to captivities and migrations across great deserts and Inigo felt them in every limb.

When everybody sat up again at the end of the prayer, Mr. Grudy stood there, very erect, and did nothing but look at them for at least two minutes. Inigo wondered what would happen next.

"Jee-ee——" sang Mr. Grudy.

Everybody jumped up at once—except Inigo. He sat there a second too long; his end of the form went down and he fell with a crash; the other end shooting up and slightly forward, hurled a little round man—it was the toothless one—into the seat in front; and there was a confusion and uproar. The hymn could not begin until the little man had been restored to his own row, the seat had been put back in its place, and Inigo, crimson, dusty and furious, had scrambled to his feet.

"Jee-ee——" sang Mr. Grudy again, and this time they were off. Inigo did not sing, for the hymn was one he had never heard before. He felt foolish. When they came to sit down again, he felt still more foolish because the few inches allotted to him had now been swallowed up. He was about to abandon the seat altogether, to go and lean against the wall, when Freda captured about six inches from the large lady on her right and offered it to him so prettily that he could not refuse. And there he sat, very close, for the rest of the evening.

Mr. E. G. Timpany was called upon to address them. Moist and triumphant, he stepped forward, clutching at a large bundle of notes,

and looked all gold spectacles and teeth and preposterous auburn curls. He beamed upon them. For such moments as these he would gladly have sold all Wolverhampton. He produced figures, compared the numbers in Ephraim with those in Dan, was convinced that Gad would soon outstrip Issachar and even gave them percentages. Indeed, he made such good use of his correspondence course in accountancy that Inigo expected him at any moment to remember his other course and drop into Commercial Spanish. It was impossible not to like Mr. Timpany, he was so innocently happy, so naïvely proud of his position as organising secretary. Inigo found it quite painful to think that just when Mr. Timpany was beginning to enjoy this life, he would either have to quit it or be compelled to admit he was a fool—unless it was possible for the Second Resurrectionists continually to postpone Doomsday.

Mrs. Bevison-Burr, the commanding woman, came next. Her subject was Unbelief. She referred to Unbelief as if it were a very obnoxious person who was in the habit of insulting her every morning and evening. Mrs. Bevison-Burr commanded them to do all manner of things to Unbelief. She did not hold out any great hopes for them when they had done all these things. Only a few of them were wanted by Jehovah, but the least they could all do was to settle Unbelief. They were asked to remember that Unbelief and Bolshevism were one and the same. There was little more about Jehovah, to whom she referred as if he were a prominent politician staying at her country house. Mrs. Bevison-Burr was not a success, though her presence there was evidently gratifying to most of her audience.

Major Dunker followed. His themes were the Pyramids, international relations, and earthquakes. Holding a little notebook very close to his face, he talked at some length of pyramid inches, which determined all the chief dates in the world's history, but it was difficult to follow this part of his speech because of the notebook. He passed on to international relations, which were rapidly approaching a supreme crisis. We were on the eve of the greatest and the last of all wars, the real Armageddon. But worse was to come. Earthquakes. Everybody had noticed that in recent years there had been more and more storms and floods and earthquakes, and scientists had been all baffled by these phenomena. All over the world they were investigating to dis-

cover the causes of these disturbances. They could find nothing. The causes were not in the mere rise and fall of the barometer nor even in spots in the sun. Forces were being let loose upon this planet that had formerly been restrained. These were the first activities of the newly released Prince of Darkness. *And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison.* And having delivered this quotation in the same dry tones he had used throughout, the Major abruptly concluded. He was, Inigo decided, quietly and decently mad.

Mr. Grudy called for the testimony of other friends. Nobody spoke for a minute or two. Then a man with a black beard jumped up, said something about King George the Fifth being the ninety-ninth in succession from King David, and then sat down again. He was followed by a shrill little woman, who declared that she had dreamt four times that year of an angel waving something that looked like a golden coal-scuttle over the dome of St. Paul's. Mr. Grudy nodded approvingly at her, but there seemed to be a general impression that she had not done well in putting herself forward in this way. After that there was another wait. Then Mr. Grudy stepped forward again and was about to address them when there was a stir at the back of the hall.

"I see that our friend, the Reverend Higginworth Wenderby, has arrived," cried Mr. Grudy. "I am sure he will be pleased to give us his testimony. It is a privilege to have him here with us."

A tall stout man in black climbed on to the platform, and stood there, panting and mopping his brow, while they applauded furiously. He was a curious figure. He had a mane of dark hair and an unusually large, white, wet face, which retreated at the forehead and the chin. "My dear friends," he boomed, "please allow me a moment. I cannot talk to you without breath, and I have come here in such haste that I have no breath." Everybody applauded again, including Inigo, who looked round and saw that a change had come over the whole meeting. Everybody seemed expectant. They were leaning forward now, all eager attention.

Mr. Wenderby held up a large white hand. "My friends," he began, softly this time, "it is a joy to address you once more, and there are not many joys in this vale of suffering and sorrow. We live here in sin, and Death is busy among the people. The husband must go from

the wife, and the mother must weep over the departed child." He continued in this strain for some time, his voice as artful and moving as a passage for muted strings. The matter was nothing, the manner everything; and even Inigo, who had disliked the man at sight, found himself vaguely moved. As for the rest of his audience, they frankly abandoned themselves to the luxury of easy emotion. Some of the women sobbed. Freda stirred uneasily and bit her underlip. Inigo sat there in both physical and mental discomfort.

Mr. Wenderby paused and let his huge head droop. Then he raised it, higher and higher, until at last his white wet face seemed to shine in the light. "But have I come here, my friends, to bear testimony to these things?" he asked, without raising his voice. "Are they strange tidings, these of sin and misery and death, that I should come and relate them to you? Have I nothing more to say? Is this the end of our message?" He stepped forward another pace, so that he stood on the very edge of the platform. "No," he thundered. "No, and a thousand times, no!"

"Ephraim!" yelled a voice in Inigo's ear.

"I beg your pardon," he cried, startled. But the man, who had drawn up a chair just behind Inigo, took no notice whatever of him but stared fixedly at the preacher.

"I look for the Word, and the Word is here." Mr. Wenderby, now in full diapason, held up his Bible. "And after these things," he chanted, "I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power unto the Lord our God. For true and righteous are his judgments; for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever." Mr. Wenderby then crumbled the world to dust and blew it away in one mighty shout. He led the faithful to their eternal home. He arrayed them in fine linen and took them through the gates of pearl and along the streets of pure gold to where the river of the water of life flowed from the throne of the Lamb.

The arms he raised seemed to lift most of his audience out of their seats. If they had groaned before, now they shouted. Only Mrs. Bevi-

son-Burr and Major Dunker remained unmoved. Mr. Timpany had taken off his spectacles and was wiping them feverishly. Mr. Grudy towered in his chair and his face grew bright in the glow of unseen desert suns. Inigo looked round in astonishment. The place was a pandemonium. Face after face, almost transfigured, caught and held his glance. This then was the secret, these moments, crashing in Dionysiac rout through months of boredom, glittering and trumpeting for a space in lives as quiet and faded as an old photograph. Something pitiful tugged at his heart, then was gone.

Mr. Wenderby, dripping and paler than ever, blessed them fervently. All was over. There was a rush to the platform. "What do we do now?" asked Inigo.

"Let's go, shall we?" said Freda. "It wasn't quite so frightening this time, but it was bad enough. You feel better about it all outside, I've noticed."

They walked up the road, cheerfully libelling all the Second Resurrectionists, but when they arrived at the house, Freda hesitated. "I suppose I ought to go in, really. My aunt may want me to help her with supper."

"Supper!" Inigo was horrified. "There can't be supper, not after that tea. Surely none of 'em will want supper—unless they're going to stay up all night."

"Yes, they will. They're awful greedies, I can tell you. And Uncle will be bringing some of them in. That's why I don't want to go in. They'll talk and talk and talk, and I've had enough of it, haven't you?"

He admitted that he had had a good deal of it. They strolled about a mile further up the road, stood on a bridge and talked nonsense, and then returned to the house. Freda did not go in, however, but crept up to a lighted window and peeped through a space between the drawn curtains.

"They are there," she announced, "and they're eating sandwiches. Didn't I say they would?"

"It's incredible," Inigo cried softly. "They can't go on putting it away like this. They simply will bring the world to an end. I can

see Timpany's teeth just fastening on a wretched sandwich. Horrible, horrible! Come away."

Freda had another peep, then joined him. "Mr. Wenderby's there. I don't like him, do you? He's the queerest of them all, I think. Do you know, he always calls me 'Little sister'——"

"Like his infernal cheek!"

"And—and—he always looks as if he wants to kiss me. He doesn't, you know——"

"I should think not."

"But I always feel he would if I didn't dodge. He frightens me."

"Then he's a vile brute," cried Inigo. He was quite indignant. The arm he slipped round her, as she stood there looking so defenceless, so prettily forlorn, quivered with righteous indignation.

"Do you think so?" she murmured, not stirring except to lift her face a little.

"Beyond the pale, absolutely," said Inigo firmly. He saw her fair face tilting until it caught the light. He saw the dark curve of her mouth. It was irresistible. He bent forward, and at that very moment the front door opened. Before anybody could come out, Freda had flown round the corner. Inigo went after her but by the time he had caught up to her they had been all round the house and were back again at the front door.

In the hall they met Mr. Timpany. "A splendid gathering, wasn't it?" he called to them.

They replied, breathlessly, that it was, absolutely splendid.

"Now don't tell me you're sorry you came, Mr. Jollifant," Mr. Timpany continued. "Don't tell me you weren't interested."

"I won't," said Inigo, shaking him by the hand.

II

On the following night, Wednesday, Inigo was sauntering through the streets of Nottingham. He had not gone there to look for Mr. Morton Mitcham, though he had reminded himself, with a certain quickening of interest, that this was Mr. Mitcham's destination, where, like the gentleman of leisure he was, he had decided to look up a few old friends. At any moment, Inigo told himself, he might be passing an old friend

of Mr. Mitcham's. Inigo was there, however, because at the breakfast table that morning Freda had declared that she must go to Nottingham to visit a dentist. It then appeared at once that Inigo, who had been rather vague about his movements, was really on his way to Nottingham too. This astonishing coincidence had landed the pair of them on the same motorbus from Oxwell, given them the same table for lunch, and finally, at Freda's request, had condemned them to spend the afternoon together, and some of it unnecessarily close together, in a huge sensuous cavern that called itself a picture palace.

Inigo did not care very much for films, especially in the middle of the afternoon, when their bludgeoning sentimentality, their glycerine tears, seemed downright blasphemy. This picture palace had an organ that was nothing but one gigantic, relentless, quavering *vox humana* stop, and listening to it was like being forcibly fed with treacle. However, Freda, having escaped from the wilderness of Oxwell, the captivity of the Second Resurrectionists, enjoyed it all. She munched chocolates, drank tea, ate little cakes, and coughed her way through two cigarettes; she laughed when the screen told her to laugh, stared mournfully when all was lost save love and the *vox humana* stop shuddered and gasped and clutched at Inigo at all appropriate crises; and filled in the duller intervals in the programme by flirting with him. They were in there so long that Inigo was surprised to emerge, blinking, into broad daylight, and for a moment or so the sane and three-dimensional world about him looked quite unreal. It also made him feel rather foolish, and somehow he said good-bye to Freda, still rosy and smiling as she mounted the 6.15 motorbus, with a feeling that was more like relief than regret. He returned to the mournful little commercial hotel where he had left his knapsack and there had a very bad dinner.

After wandering about the streets for quarter of an hour or so, Inigo turned into the nearest tavern for a glass of bitter. The place was almost empty, fortunately, for he wanted to be quiet and to think. What was he going to do? Should he wander on like this for a few days more, then return to his uncle's place at Dulwich and, once there, go the rounds of the scholastic agents? Did he want to go on teaching? No, he did not. But what did he want to do? He didn't know. He could afford to give himself a little holiday, but sooner or later

he would have to decide about a job. This was an opportunity to experiment, certainly, but what was he going to experiment in? Journalism? His soul revolted, absolutely. It was while he was still telling himself how much his soul revolted or was prepared to revolt that the landlord came in and nodded to him.

"Breakin' up now," said the landlord. "But we can't grumble, can we? 'Ad a good month."

Inigo never knew what to reply to remarks of this kind about the weather. People who made them always seemed to belong to a society of weather observers or even weather owners, and he always felt that he himself was too much of an outsider to do more than merely mumble something in response. He mumbled now, then hesitated, and finally remarked: "I've just been wondering what to do. Now what would you do if you were a young man like me, with a little, just a very little, money of your own?"

"I wouldn't go into this business again," replied the landlord promptly.

"You wouldn't eh?"

"Wouldn't touch it, wouldn't have it given. Nothing in it now. All to pieces. What with dogs, football, pitchers, one thing and another —you can't sell beer, can't get 'em regular, yer know. Oh, I wouldn't look at it." He straddled in front of the fireplace and jingled some coppers in his pocket.

"Well, what would you do?" asked Inigo.

"If I'd my time over again, I wouldn't 'esitate," replied the landlord, lowering his voice. "I'd make a book, go in the ring. It's money for dust. They can't give it to you fast enough. Why, there's fellers come in 'ere—tut-t-t——" And he tut-tutted away and wagged his head to show that mere words were failing him.

"Be a bookie, eh? That's no good to me, I'm afraid. Nothing in my line. I don't understand racing and I couldn't shout loud enough."

"Don't need to shout, don't need to know anything," cried the other. "Some o' these fellers 'ardly know where they live. Doesn't matter. They get it all the same. Rolling it in, rolling! And where do they get it from, where do they get it from?" He walked right across the room to ask this momentous question and stood over Inigo, who told him he didn't know where they got it from. "All right, I'll tell

you," said the landlord. "They get it from mugs, like you and me. Mugs! Don't they, Charlie?" This was to a man who had just entered the room.

"That's right, Jack," said Charlie, winking at Inigo. "I don't know what you're talking about, but that's right." And he sat down, pushed his cap to the back of his head, and began whistling very loudly.

"'Ere, Charlie," said the landlord, "what's this about old Fred telling Jimmy you said I'd picked up a tenner on Cherry Lass?"

Inigo made his escape. The streets were lighted now and livelier, but the only entertainment they offered him was that of watching innumerable youths ogle innumerable pairs of over-powdered and undernourished young girls, who took care to parade within easy reach of the various picture theatres. He soon came to the conclusion that these streets were not lively at all. They began to depress him. He thought once of going in, to add a few sentences to *The Last Knapsack,* but the image of that melancholy commercial hotel daunted him. No good literature could be composed in that hotel. "It would all come out wrong," he told himself. "I should be putting down 'as per yours' and things like that."

He stopped outside a large and glittering tavern. It announced that it had a Singing Room, and Inigo did not remember ever having been inside a Singing Room. He walked in, to find himself facing a long curved bar that had far too many mirrors and electric lights. Business was brisk, so brisk that the bar counter was flooded, the change he received was all wet, and the beer itself had a nasty rinsed look. There were several swing doors, gorgeous with leaded lights, opening out of this bar, but there was nothing to indicate the one that would admit him to the Singing Room. He took a sip of beer, put the glass down and determined to forget about it, and began dodging through the throng, to find the Singing Room. It was then that he heard, behind the back of a man who held one of the swing doors open, the voice. "In the absence of the pianist, ladies and gentlemen," said the voice, "I will not give you one of my famous banjo solos, but I will, with the kind permission of one and all, endeavour to entertain you with a few feats of sleight of hand."

There was no mistaking it. This was the voice of that returned

traveller, that gentleman of leisure, that looker-up of old friends in Nottingham, Mr. Morton Mitcham.

Inigo pushed his way in. This was the Singing Room, and there, at the far end of it, near the piano, addressing an audience of about twenty men, youths, and girls, who did not seem particularly interested in him, was Mr. Morton Mitcham. He wore the same light check suit, the same Mad Hatter collar and tie; and his eyebrows seemed larger, his nose richer, and his chin longer and bluer than they did before. "I will open," he was saying, "with a little trick I've performed in all parts of the world, America, Australia, India, and every important place in the U-nited Kingdom—except Nottingham. Notice that, ladies and gentlemen,—except Nottingham." He held out a pack of cards. "Now I want a lady or gentleman to take a card——"

"Any orders?" cried a waiter suddenly springing up from nowhere.

"Wairer, I wanternother double." This was from a very ripe gentleman, who was sprawling at a little table by himself.

Inigo told the waiter to bring him a bottle of Bass and sat down not far from the ripe gentleman and near a middle-aged man and a little woman with eye-glasses who were sitting over two glasses of stout and placidly holding hands. Mr. Mitcham stared at the newcomer, brought his immense eyebrows down and pursed up his lips. Inigo grinned at him and at last got a nod and a grin in return. Mr. Mitcham, who clearly did not want to begin his trick until the waiter had returned, crossed over and calmly remarked to Inigo: "I know you, my boy, and I see you know me. I'm just trying to place you."

"We met the other midnight at Dullingham Junction," said Inigo.

"Of course we did. And you had the chocolate and biscuits. And a merry little session we had, didn't we?" He lowered his voice. "I'm just filling in the evening here, you know, just amusing myself. This isn't my kind of thing at all."

"No, I should think not. Have a drink?"

"Thank you, my boy, I will. I'll have a whisky, just a—well, you might as well make it a double Scotch." He lowered his voice again. "If you told most people you'd seen Morton Mitcham here, they wouldn't believe, simply wouldn't believe you. But it amuses me, you know.

And I like to show these boys and girls a thing or two. They've seen nothing, absolutely nothing."

The waiter having returned and departed again for the double whisky, Mr. Mitcham began his performance. A man in a brown hat far too small for him was persuaded to take a card. "Look at that card, sir," said Mr. Mitcham impressively, "examine it carefully. You may show it to any other members of the audience, but don't let me see it, ha-ha! Now take this envelope, an ordinary plain white envelope, you observe, and place the card in the envelope and put the flap inside. Don't lick the envelope, sir, I may want it again. Now I take the envelope. It is impossible for me to see what the card is. Now follow me closely. I shall place the envelope——"

But here the ripe gentleman created a diversion. "Never mind about cards," he cried thickly. "I wanner a bit o' music."

"I say, I shall place the envelope underneath this handkerchief——"

"I wanner a bit o' music."

Mr. Mitcham frowned at him. "All in good time, sir, all in good time. Just now I'm trying to entertain the company with this trick. I shall be much obliged, sir," he said severely, "if you will not interrupt."

"Thaz all ri', thaz all ri'!" he waved a hand, and a large and idiotic smile slowly spread over his rubicund face.

"It is, you will observe, an ordinary handkerchief. I slip the envelope underneath——"

"Ber I like a bit o' music."

Mr. Mitcham stopped and glared. Two or three members of his audience laughed, but a young man in a green cloth cap was very annoyed. "Oh, put a sock in it," he said to the ripe gentleman, who immediately and very loudly asked him what he meant by it.

"Now then, gentlemen, give order *if* you please," cried the waiter, who had returned with Mr. Mitcham's double whisky. They gave order, and Mr. Mitcham was able to finish the trick, which he did by producing the card that was placed in the envelope from the middle of the pack, to the astonishment and admiration of everybody except the ripe gentleman and the two people who were holding hands. Inigo himself thought it a very good trick indeed. The young man in the

green cap was loud in his admiration. "Clever!" he cried aggressively. "And new to me. Clever!"

"I seen it done once before," said the man who had first taken the card. "Fellow at the Hippodrome 'ere done it."

"May I ask his name, sir," said Mr. Mitcham, frowning. "Because that's my trick. I think you must be mistaken."

"No, I'm not," replied the other, mildly though firmly. "I seen it all right. And I'll tell you his name. The Great Julius, that was him. The Great Julius. He was a Yank."

"You're right, you're right," cried Mr. Mitcham, with hearty condescension. "If it was the Great Julius, you're right. I taught him that trick in Philadelphia in 1910. There was no Great Julius about him then, I can tell you. He was just plain Julius Isenbaum, and nobody could be plainer. Yes, I taught him that trick."

Inigo gazed at him in admiration, caught his eye and indicated the presence of the whisky. The great man strode across, gave him a wink and "the best, my boy!", and halved the liquor in one gulp. Then he produced a number of cards from his elbow, his knee, and the empty air, and finally asked the young man in the green cap, who still said "Clever!" at intervals, to put the four queens wherever he liked in the pack. Mr. Mitcham then shuffled the pack, held it up in one hand, held it up in the other hand, and put it down on the nearest table. The four queens, however, he produced from the pocket of the ripe gentleman, who had fallen into a doze. This delighted everybody except the ripe gentleman himself, who hit the table and cried: "All a lorrer bunkum! Lessav a birrer music."

"That's right. Where's Joe?" asked some one.

"Joe's the pianist," Mr. Mitcham explained to Inigo. "Regular job here, you know, but hasn't turned up tonight. Here's the vocalist," and he waved a hand at a rather short and flat-faced man who had just entered the room. "He can't do anything, either. But I shall try 'em with the banjo soon, pianist or no pianist. I've kept a whole room going with that banjo in places where there wasn't a piano within two or three hundred miles. Believe me, my boy, I've travelled a hundred and fifty miles just to play it at a wedding party. That was up in Saskatchewan one time, Ninety-five or Ninety-six, I think it was." He finished the

whisky, then added: "No, it wasn't. I'm not telling you the truth." Inigo gasped. "It was in Ninety-four," Mr. Mitcham concluded triumphantly.

Inigo glanced across at the piano, which was an ancient grand. "Look here," he said finally, "I think I could knock something out of that, if you really want a pianist."

"Of course you could," cried Mr. Mitcham enthusiastically. "Didn't you tell me the other night you played? You're the very man we're looking for. Let me see—your name's just slipped—oh, Jollifant, is it? Of course it is." He beckoned the vocalist and rose impressively at his approach. "Meet Mr. Jollifant, an old friend of mine, who's just turned up and who's one of the finest pianists that's ever stepped into this town. He's just promised to help us out."

Five minutes later Inigo found himself sitting at the piano with some tattered sheets of music in front of him. It had been arranged that the vocalist should take his turn first. Inigo ran his fingers over the keys, which were very yellow, burned in places, and far too loose. The piano itself, however, was better than he had imagined it to be, and was certainly capable of making a terrific din. He dashed into the opening bars of the first tattered song, and the vocalist, in a voice so hard and so high that it hurt, proclaimed to the Singing Room that he lived in a la-and of rer-hoses but he drer-heamed of a la-land of sner-how. At the conclusion of this astonishing ballad there was a certain amount of applause, led by the ripe gentleman, who had been beating time and humming in a vague sort of way. The vocalist treated his ravaged throat to a draught of stout, waited until six newcomers had sat down and given orders, then nodded to Inigo and declared, in his highest and hardest notes, that the woman for him in all the world was just his dear old mother. This was a sentiment that aroused the enthusiasm of the company, and one after another of them joined in until at last they were all asserting that the one woman for them was just their dear old mothers. By the time it was ended, the room was nearly full, and there was so much applause that the vocalist, now purple in the face, had to "thank them one and all" and burst into an encore. Here again it appeared they had all a common enthusiasm, this time for dear old Ireland, especially the colleen in the cabin back in Connemara. Only

Inigo, Mr. Morton Mitcham, and the waiter appeared to have no tender memories of this colleen.

The vocalist departed; Mr. Mitcham began tuning his banjo; the waiter collected orders and told Inigo to give it a name; more people came crowding in and filled the room with smoke and babble; Mr. Mitcham whispered instructions and hummed tunes in Inigo's ear; the waiter dumped glasses of beer and whisky on the piano; the ripe gentleman vainly demanded more double Scotches; and Inigo emptied the glass in front of him and began to feel excited.

Off they went, softly at first, Mr. Mitcham wagging his head to his lilting twanka-pang, twanka-pang, Inigo vamping away and putting in artful variations. More and more people came crowding in, to tapper-tap-tap with their feet. Mr. Mitcham wagged furiously, quickening the pace. Inigo never lagged behind for a second and the louder and faster they went, the crazier were his elaborations. He would bring down both hands to crash and rumble in the bass and then would send them tinkling like hey-go-mad in the treble. "Quiet!" cried Mr. Mitcham, and then played as softly and solemnly as it is possible to play a banjo; indeed, you would not have thought it possible. Then, after a minute of this—"let her go!" he cried. And they let her go, in a triumph of twanging and panging and tinkling and crashing. And when it was done, the Singing Room let itself go too. There was such a din that the landlord himself looked in and was delighted to see how enthusiastic and hot and thirsty everybody appeared to be.

"With your permission, ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Mitcham, after he had acknowledged the applause, mopped his face, and drained his glass, "a little impression of a military patrol. I may say that I first thought of this number when listening to some of our own brave boys up at—er—Allahabad."

There was a great stamping of feet and banging of glasses, and a red-faced man roared out that the banjoist was a good old something-or-other "wallah." Mr. Mitcham bowed his acknowledgments, then produced his impression of a military patrol, which he did simply playing a quickstep very softly at first and gradually increasing the tone. As no accompaniment was necessary, Inigo took another drink from those that were still steadily finding their way to the top of the piano,

looked about him, and tried, not very successfully, to simmer down and give the appearance of being an old hand. The military patrol was a tremendous success, and Mr. Mitcham had to give the latter half of it all over again. He then waved a hand to show that he was completely exhausted. "You give 'em something," he told Inigo, and emptied several glasses.

Inigo promptly played some of his own little tunes, finally arriving at the one we all know too well now, his *Slipping round the Corner*. While he was still strumming it quietly, he heard a queer clinking sound and saw the long lean figure of Mr. Morton Mitcham moving about the crowded room. That gentleman of leisure was undoubtedly going round with the hat. Inigo had a shock, but it did not last long. "In for a penny, in for a pound," he told himself; and then added: "If it is a pound." He could hear the feet tapping to his tune. Perhaps he did not play it as well as he had done at Washbury Manor—now a little dark place thousands of miles away—but he ended by playing it even faster and louder. Nor did he end alone, for Mr. Mitcham, presumably with the hat, returned to join in with admirable gusto, having picked up the tune. The whole Singing Room was slipping round the corner.

"Time, gentlemen, please!" the waiter shouted, but nobody appeared to take any notice of him, except the two performers, who came to a triumphant conclusion. There was no doubt about their reception. The Singing Room had not heard so enthusiastic applause for years. Three glasses were broken. There were cries of "Encore" and "keep on, boys." But Mr. Mitcham, still the dignified performer in spite of his dripping face and the innumerable drinks he had consumed, shook his head at Inigo.

"Time, gentlemen, if *you* please!" cried the waiter again, now in an agony of supplication. Several moist enthusiasts insisted upon shaking the musicians by the hand, and there was trouble with the ripe gentleman, who was crawling about the floor looking for his hat; but gradually the room was cleared. Inigo felt rather dazed. He saw Mr. Mitcham very carefully counting a heap of small change. Then he discovered the landlord at his elbow.

"You can tickle 'em all right," said the landlord, pointing to the keyboard. "'Ere, 'alf a minute." And he dragged Inigo to one side.

"If thirty bob a week's any good to you," he said, lowering his voice, "and all the drinks you want, the job's yours and Joe can go to 'ell."

"Thanks," Inigo found himself muttering, "but I don't want the job, if that's what you mean."

"What's the matter with it?" the landlord demanded. "You won't get better money in this town, let me tell you."

"But I'm not staying on in this town."

"Ah, that's different, that is. Well, you can tickle 'em all right. Give us a call and a tune any time you're round this way. 'Ere." And he dragged Inigo back again, to where Mr. Mitcham was counting his coppers. "This is my little contribution, gentlemen." He threw a ten shilling note on the heap, drew Mr. Mitcham on one side to whisper to him, then shouted to the waiter and walked away.

Mr. Mitcham wrapped up the money in a handkerchief. "I know a place where they'll give us a decent little feed, that is, decent for these parts. There's no *food* really here, of course; you mustn't expect it. Now what about giving ourselves a little supper? I've hardly had a bite all day, didn't want it, you know. I'm so used to feeding late. Come on then; it's not far, just near the station."

They sat in the window of the upstairs room of the unpretentious little restaurant, which was almost empty. Inigo ordered a mere snack, but Mr. Mitcham, who gave Inigo the impression of having been on short commons for a day or two, asked for large steaks and bushels of onions and potatoes. As soon as the waitress had gone, he brought out the handkerchief containing the money. "Now then," he began, "the landlord made it ten, didn't he? And the takings in the room were twenty-three shillings and ninepence ha'penny. That's exactly thirty-three shillings and ninepence ha'penny. Now what's half of that?"

"Sixteen and something," replied Inigo. "But why do you want to know? Are you thinking of dividing it between us?"

"Naturally, my boy, naturally! Like an honest trouper! No quibbling about shares, either. I don't say," he added thoughtfully, "that some of this might not have been a little appreciation of my sleight of hand, and of course you'd nothing to do with that. That card in the envelope trick went devilishly well, you know. But—share and share alike, I say, and no quibbling."

"I can't take any of it. It's jolly good of you, but I can't."

"You can't?"

"No. You see——"

Mr. Mitcham patted him on the arm and at the same time, with great dexterity, swept all the money away with the other hand. "My dear boy, of course I see. You've no need to tell me."

"I did it for a lark, you see——"

"Just for the fun of the thing and to oblige a friend," cried Mr. Mitcham enthusiastically. "And naturally you wouldn't touch a penny of it. I know, because that's just how I feel myself. Done it myself many a time. Ask them in Toronto what Morton Mitcham did at old Reilly's benefit, or for that fire concert in 'Frisco, or the time when the stage hands went out at Melbourne. I know your feelings, know them to a hair, my dear boy. They're the feelings of a gentleman, a musician, a true artist. You remind me—everything you've done has reminded me of Captain Dunstan-Carew—played for me, played with me, scores of times out in India, and 'Proud to do it, Mitcham,' he'd say, and he was the best amateur pianist out there—*and* a Dunstan-Carew. You've both got the same touch—recognised it in a minute—a gentlemanly touch, but full of fun, plenty of devil in it."

Inigo said he was proud to have the same touch as Captain Dunstan-Carew.

"But I'll tell you one thing, my boy," continued Mr. Mitcham. "You may not let me give you a share of the takings, but you're going to let me pay for this supper. I insist. I don't care what you're having to-night, I insist. The supper is mine." He looked first at Inigo and then round the room with such an air of noble generosity that Inigo found it difficult to remember that his own share of the supper would only amount to about tenpence.

"For that matter, of course," said Mr. Mitcham, after he had wolfed in silence the greater part of his steak, "this business tonight's been a mere piece of foolery with me. As I told you before, I think, it's not at all my line of country. But, the fact is, I've been unlucky just lately. You know what it is. Twenty years ago I was landed in the same damned hole. No, it was worse. I was down there in Memphis——"

"Not Memphis!" cried Inigo in delight.

"Memphis," replied Mr. Mitcham firmly. "And I hadn't a nickel to my name. And you can imagine what a hole Memphis is when you haven't a cent."

"Rather!" cried Inigo. "You couldn't be in a worse place, could you?" He said this with conviction, though actually all that he knew about Memphis was that it is a city somewhere in the United States.

"You couldn't. Well, three months afterwards, exactly three months —where was I? I'll tell you. I was in a suite on the first floor of the best hotel in all New Orleans, and telegrams pouring in, just pouring in. Go here, go there, go everywhere! Three syndicates all eating out of my hand! I don't say it will be the same all over again *exactly*. Times have changed, my boy, you can take it from me. There's not enough money in this country. But, as I was saying, I've been unlucky just lately. Vaudeville's gone to pieces here, absolutely to pieces. And what with one thing and another, these last few weeks I've just been living from hand to mouth, on little engagements picked up here and there, some of it damned near to busking. If it was summer, I wouldn't mind, but winter—you know what it is. You want a cast-iron contract in winter. I tell you, things have been so bad, I've even considered band work, but I couldn't get near, couldn't get near. The Union, you know—they've a union and it won't let an outsider come within a mile. Then I thought of concert party work, pierrot stuff. It's a hell of a drop, of course. Mind you, I won't say I've never done it before. I've even done the black-faced business, though that was in the days when it still had style."

"But these concert parties or pierrots or whatever they call themselves, don't they just go round, hopping from pier to pier, so to speak, in summer? Won't they all have just finished?" And it struck Inigo that he had not seen any of these troupes for years. Did the men still bend their knees in an idiotic way when they sang choruses? What a life!

"Most of them have finished now, but some keep on through the winter, doing small inland towns, you know, where people are glad to see anybody."

"They must be," said Inigo, who was still turning over his memories.

"Well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do, and I want you to listen

very carefully, my boy. I'm going to see a concert party tomorrow. And I'll tell you why. I ran across two people I know—decent nice folks, man and wife, vocalists, but not, I think, absolutely bursting with talent—and they told me they were in a troupe that was running on through the winter and there might be a vacancy or two in the autumn. I saw a notice in *The Stage* saying they were at Rawsley for two weeks, that's not too far from here, and so tomorrow I'm running over to have a look at 'em. Now if you're doing nothing—but, look here, what *are* you doing?"

Inigo gave a brief but spirited sketch of his own position.

"If you do anything but play the piano," said Mr. Mitcham earnestly, "you're just throwing yourself away. I was watching your work tonight, and I said to myself 'That boy was born with it. A bit of experience, a few tips from an old hand, and he can go anywhere.' And, believe me, I *know*. I've seen and heard thousands."

Inigo laughed. "Did you like my tunes?"

"Catchy stuff, very catchy stuff, and new to me. Where did you pick 'em up?"

"Out of the ether."

"Ah, I never bother with this wireless myself," said Mr. Mitcham judiciously, "but I've no doubt you can pick up a good tune or two occasionally if you listen long enough."

"No, no, I don't mean that. I mean, they're my own tunes. I make 'em up myself."

Mr. Mitcham stared at him. Then he extended a long yellow hand. "Shake that," he commanded, "and as hard as you like. Now you listen to me. There's a pot of money in those tunes if they're properly handled. You've got the gift, though, mind you, I don't say you don't need experience or a little advice from people who've had experience. After this, I can't let you go, I just can't. It would be a crime. You've just got to stick to the old man, my boy. Come with me tomorrow. If there's an opening for me, there'll have to be one for you too. If there isn't, we can move on. We'll try that stuff out somewhere."

Inigo had come to the conclusion that it really would be rather a lark. "But what do they call this pierrot troupe?" he asked.

"I'll tell you in a minute," replied the other. He fumbled in his

waistcoat pocket and finally produced a little newspaper cutting. "Here it is. They call themselves 'The Dinky Doos.'"

Inigo gave a yell. "But I couldn't be a Dinky Doo," he gasped. "Don't ask me to be a Dinky Doo."

Mr. Mitcham lowered his great eyebrows. "What's the matter? Do you know the show?"

"No, but the name, the name! It would hurt, absolutely."

"No, a mere nothing, that!" Mr. Mitcham's face cleared, and it was as if the sun had risen upon those black hills of South Dakota he had once mentioned. He stood up, then patted Inigo on the shoulder. "If I don't mind the name, you shouldn't. At your age, my dear boy, it doesn't matter what they call you or make you wear; you can get away with it. But look at me, at my age! I ask you, do I look like a Dinky Doo?"

He looked fantastic enough for anything, Inigo thought. All that he said, however, was that they might put it to the waitress, who was approaching with the bill. "Now would you say," Inigo solemnly enquired of her, "that either of us looked like a Dinky Doo?"

"Get on with you!" said the waitress, who understood this to be some sort of chaff but was too sleepy to bother her head about it.

"And that's the answer all right," said Mr. Mitcham as they walked down the stairs. "Get on with it. I'll look you up in the morning. Where are you staying?"

And in the morning, quite early, Mr. Mitcham arrived at Inigo's hotel, accompanied by his banjo-case and his large and disreputable bag. He did not say where he had been sleeping, and had the appearance of not having slept anywhere except in his check suit. Two little cross-country trains finally landed them in Rawsley, and in the early afternoon they walked past those Station Refreshment Rooms to which, later, they had to return. Mr. Mitcham did not know where his acquaintances, whose name was Brundit, were staying, in the town, and it took some time to find their lodgings. Inigo did not see how it was to be done at all, but Mr. Mitcham, pointing out once more that he was an old hand, declared that everybody in these small towns knew everybody else's business and succeeded in uncovering a trail that brought them at last to the temporary home of the Brundits. There, a little woman

with five curling-pins stuck round her furrowed forehead gave them cheerless news. The "Dinky Doos" were no more.

"And I'm sure I'm right sorry for them. Mr. and Mrs. Brundit, too. Very nice people, and them with a little boy of their own," said the bepinned landlady breathlessly. "Off he goes on Sunday, this chap that's running it all, and the young woman that plays the piano for them going with him, and not a penny they've had for weeks. And people in the town's saying all sorts of things about them—and of course you do want your money, don't you, especially these days, when everything's top price—but as I say, and I'm as much out as anybody, I feel right sorry for them, and didn't know where to look when they came and told me, and Mrs. Brundit, such a dignified and lady-like person, not like some of them, crying the eyes out of her. And now they've gone down to the station to see about something, and they told me they'd be all having a cup of tea and bit of a meeting down at Mrs. Mounder's—that's the Station Refreshment Rooms, a tin place, just opposite—and that's where you're likely to find them, if you ask me."

That is how they came to be at the Station Refreshment Rooms, entering them—or rather it—for there was only one large public room in the hut—at the same time as a slender fair woman and her surprising companion, a short but sturdy man who looked like a workman of some kind or other. The four of them seemed to Inigo to make a very odd quartette indeed.

There were only six people in the tea-room, and they were all sitting together at the far end. Obviously these were the forlorn entertainers, though they did not sound very forlorn, for they all seemed to be talking at the top of their voices and laughing a great deal. Mr. Mitcham marched up the room to them, and he was followed by the fair woman who had just come out of the car. Inigo, for once unaccountably shy, hesitated, took off his knapsack, then stopped where he was. He turned to find that the little man who looked like a workman had also stopped. Their eyes met. Inigo raised his eyebrows and gave a little grin. The other replied with a wink.

"Are these here," he began, in a kind of hearty whisper, "the thing-umjybobs—*pier-rots?*"

"They are," replied Inigo. "They call themselves the Dinky Doos."

"Eh, they get some daft names!" Then he added ruminatively: "I know nowt about a Dinky Doo, but it seems to be a queer do all right. But it's been nowt but a queer do all t'week wi' me."

Inigo was amused by his impressive tones and broad accent and earnest open face. "Oh, how's that?" he asked.

"It began o' Monday night, when you were i' bed and fast asleep, lad——"

"Half a minute, my dear sir, half a minute! Let me tell you," said Inigo, with mock solemnity, "I was not in bed and fast asleep on Monday night. I never saw a bed that night——"

"Ner more did I. Nobbut a sofa."

"I was in the waiting room of a God-forsaken place called Dullingham Junction, listening to my friend over there playing his banjo. What do you think about that?"

"I nivver knew there were so many folk wandering about. Once you've fairly set off, you come on 'em all over t'place. Do you know where I was o' Monday night?"

"I give it up."

"On a lorry wi' two o' t'biggest rogues you ivver clapped eyes on, coming down t'Great North Road." And Mr. Oakroyd's blue eyes fairly shone with pride. This time he had a listener worthy of him.

"That's the stuff, absolutely the stuff!" cried Inigo, beaming upon this droll little Yorkshireman, who was evidently a Romantic like himself. Then he looked down the room, to see Mr. Morton Mitcham beckoning him with waves of his gigantic arm.

At that moment a voice came ringing from the centre of the group. "Come on, you two," it cried. "Don't be shy. Hurry up and join in." It was a girl's voice, casual but a trifle mocking. Inigo heard it with a curious little thrill of excitement that afterwards he was at great pains to explain. He has not forgotten it yet, and perhaps he never will. It came ringing—and up went a curtain.

"Nowt shy about yon lass," said Mr. Oakroyd. "Well, we've come a fair way, we mun join in."

And that will do very well for the last word now. It is the tag of the first higgledy-piggledy piece, with its glimpses of too familiar back-

grounds, scenes that are undoubtedly set scenes, and of roads jogging invitingly out of them, with its scattered hints of discontent and rebellion and escape. Here they all are, our people, and for a little space we darken the stage that holds them, leaving them staring at one another.

: BOOK TWO :

Chapter One

IN WHICH THEY ALL BECOME "GOOD COMPANIONS"

I

"Shame isn't the word for it, it isn't really, Miss Trant," cried Miss Elsie Longstaff indignantly. "I've been in work now since last April, five months and more, consecutive, and look at the position I'm in now—having to get a sub from home! In work since last April, Miss Trant, and haven't been able to have my hair waved for three weeks! And this last week, my dear! The suspicion, the looks, the tone of voice, the things we've had to put up with all through that dirty rotter! It's wicked."

"It's the wickedest thing I ever heard of," replied Miss Trant warmly. She really had begun to feel angry with this defaulting manager. "Have another cup of tea?"

"Yes, thanks, I will." Then, with a dramatic change of tone, Miss Longstaff went on: "He got us to sign on right through till next summer. It looked a good contract. What was the result? I'd a nice pantomime offer, came in early—Dandini for seven weeks, opening at Middlesbrough—and of course I went and turned it down—flat. And now look at me!"

Miss Trant did, very sympathetically. Elsie was younger and prettier than her sister Effie, though neither so young nor so pretty as she appeared to be at a first glance. She was probably about thirty, a too determinedly golden blonde, with large blue eyes set wide apart, a face that narrowed sharply to a small pointed chin, and a discontented mouth. She looked like a knowing and slightly dishevelled doll.

"And apart from that," Miss Longstaff added, rather tearfully, "he's gone and broken up one of the best little shows on the road."

"It really was a good pierrot troupe, was it?"

"Please don't say 'pierrot troupe,' Miss Trant. It makes me think

of being on the sands and rattling a box round the crowd. Call it a 'concert party.'"

"I'm sorry. Concert party, then."

"Well, honestly, Miss Trant, it was a *good show*. Don't go and think I say that because I was in it. That's nothing. I've been in shows, my dear, that I'd tell you frankly were dead rotten. I wouldn't want anybody who knew me, or anybody who appreciated my work, to see some of the shows I've been in. But this was *good*. With any luck, we could have coined money with it."

"What a shame!" cried Miss Trant, and then looked thoughtful. Perhaps it was at this moment that a certain crazy notion began bobbing in and out of her head.

"Yes, but what's so aggravating, so fearfully maddening, my dear," cried Miss Longstaff excitedly, "is that it's a better show still, now those two are out of it, or anyhow it's got the makings of a better show."

"Weren't they good?"

"Duds, complete and unutterable duds. He did monologues and child impersonations. You never heard anything like it. He never got a hand. Mr. Charles Mildenhall in his celebrated monologues and child impersonations! My dear, it was a *scream*. They used to think it was a skit, until he went on and on. As for that precious pianist he took away with him—Marjorie Maidstone, she called herself, after the jail, I suppose—she was easily the world's worst as a pianist. She daren't have looked Little Nelly's Instruction Book in the face. Thumping away with those big fat fingers of hers, playing slow when you wanted it fast, and fast when you wanted it slow, missing the repeats—oh, ghastly! If she ruined my act once, she ruined it fifty times. With a decent pianist, we shouldn't know ourselves. And now, because they've gone and done the dirty on us, the show's finished. Isn't it sickening? It makes you lose heart."

"But can't you run it yourselves?" asked Miss Trant, who, in this new mood of hers, was dying to see somebody run something.

"Oh, we've talked and talked and talked, but it's no good. We've no money—not a bean. We've four weeks owing as it is, and can't settle for our digs here, most of us, let alone pay off for the show. They've taken all our props at the hall here, to pay the rent. It's wicked. Just

let *me* see Mr. Dirty Charles Mildenhall. Just let me set eyes on him again, and will there be trouble? Oh won't there just! Child Impersonator! Can you beat it!" And Miss Longstaff gave three dabs at her right eye before drinking her tea.

Miss Trant, after glancing round the curious assembled company, began to question her companion about these debts, and Miss Longstaff replied languidly and with many a despairing sniff. Oh yes, if all that was paid off and there was some money left to pay immediate expenses, the show could go on. And if there was enough money behind to rent His Majesty's Theatre, it could go on better still. It amounted to *that*. "What a hope!" she concluded bitterly, and evidently felt that all this talk was merely turning the knife in the wound.

"Well, I don't know——" Miss Trant hesitated. That crazy little notion was bobbing furiously now. She made an effort to pretend it was not there.

Miss Longstaff stared at her with widening eyes. Then she leaned forward, all eagerness now. "Look here, Miss Trant, you don't happen to know anybody who could put the money up, do you? I can tell you this, honestly, there isn't a more promising little show anywhere. With any luck at all, it could have been an absolute riot. I'm sure you do know of somebody, don't you?"

Instead of making a direct reply to this, Miss Trant hesitated again, then finally murmured: "I wonder how much money it would take —I mean paying all there is to pay already, and then carrying on." Her voice trailed away into a speculative silence, broken at last by the voice of common sense, pointing out that she was a fool. But then, wasn't it high time she was a fool? You can't go on being cool and sensible all the time, for ever.

Miss Longstaff leaned forward again and whispered: "Jimmy Nunn could tell you—he's been working it out, I know, because he's tried hard to get somebody to back us. He's our comedian—that's him, over there—and he's one of the best comedians going in Concert Party work—clever, and keeps it clean—and he's stiff with experience, knows it all from A to Z. You have a talk to Jimmy about it, Miss Trant. I'll bring him over." And she slipped away to whisper to a queer-looking man in a brown tweed suit.

Miss Trant had never met a comedian before, and it seemed incredible that she should be meeting one now. If Mr. Jimmy Nunn had walked across to sing a song or crack a joke or two to her, she would not have been surprised; but that Mr. Jimmy Nunn should merely announce, in a rather husky voice, that he was very pleased to meet her and then quietly sit down, was astonishing. Nevertheless, there was something distinctly droll about Mr. Nunn. His manner was grave and dignified, almost pompous, but he had obviously spent so much of his time being a funny man that this other manner sat uneasily upon him, so that by merely refraining from singing songs and cracking jokes, by talking quite seriously, he seemed to be playing a part, thus remaining a droll fellow in spite of himself. Miss Trant found his appearance quite fascinating. He was really of medium height but had the body of a large stout man and the legs of a short man; he had a bald patch in front and grey stubble of hair surrounding it, little eyes set too close together, a shining bulbous nose, and an extraordinary expanse of upper lip enclosed between two deep wrinkles; and his whole face had a curious air of being a mask that had been painted and rubbed and painted again times without number.

"Not in the profession yourself, Miss Trant?" he enquired, closing one eye and staring hard with the other. "No? I thought not, though I used to know a Mrs. Trant on the Macnaghten Circuit. No, I'm wrong; I'm lying. It was Brant. Brant's Merry Chicks—juveniles, you know—none of 'em over thirty. You're not in management by any chance?"

"I've never managed anything except a house," said Miss Trant.

"If you can do that as it ought to be done," Mr. Nunn observed, with some solemnity, "and take it easy, keep smilin', have a good word for one and all, then—I say—you couldn't do better. Isn't that so? Right." He waved the whole matter aside. Then, lowering his voice a little, he went on: "You were asking something about the show, what we're down the river for, what it would take to run it. Am I right?"

Miss Trant wanted to laugh, for though Mr. Nunn's manner was quite pompous, it kept breaking down, and all the time he gave her the drollest looks out of the particular eye that happened to be open. "Well," she faltered, "I was just—wondering——"

"Quite right!" said Mr. Nunn, and produced from his inside pocket a cheap and very soiled notebook. "I've got figures in this," he announced proudly. "It's here—most of it anyhow—in black-*and*-white."

"That's the stuff, Jimmy," said Miss Longstaff brightly.

"Just you run away and play, Elsie," Mr. Nunn commanded; and after making a little face at him and flashing a professional smile at Miss Trant, Elsie did go, joining the others, who had now formed one group at a neighbouring table.

"A good girl," remarked Mr. Nunn; "looks well and not as afraid of work as some of 'em; but——" and here he lowered his voice and leaned forward—"can't quite put it all over yet, hasn't just got—y'know——"

Miss Trant nodded and really felt she did know. "I wish," she said softly, "you would tell me about the people in this trou—party—show." She almost felt herself blushing as she brought out this last word. It sounded so knowing and professional. "You've had a lot of experience, haven't you, Mr. Nunn?"

"That's right. A lot of experience. C. P. work, halls, panto, low comedy in legit., know it all. And, mind you, whatever I may say about these boys and girls, I'll say this, as a show—or what might be a show if it was pulled together now—it's *good*." He found a cutting in the notebook and handed it over. "Here's one of our adverts. They're usually all lies, but this one's the solid truth."

The advertisement, which was from *The Stage,* ran as follows:

Wanted Known
Offers from Sept. 3 onward
THE DINKY DOOS

In a Non-Stop Programme of Clever Comedy and Exquisite Vocalism. Played to enormous business at Little Sandmouth, last. Many thanks T. Browning, Esq., for hearty welcome, and Mrs. James, G. Hudson, Esq., and R. A. Mercer, Esq., for enquiries. Refer. Refer. Refer. Next, Pav. Shingleton.

Miss Trant read it through once, wrinkled her forehead, then read it again.

"Wrote that myself," Mr. Nunn remarked, not without pride. "Always wrote the adverts for Mildenhall. Neat and effective, don't you think?"

"Yes, I should think so. But, tell me, what does 'Wanted Known' mean?" she enquired. "Why 'Known'?"

"Oh, I always put that in. And, of course, 'Known'—well, you see,—its *'Known'*—isn't it, you see?"

This was not very clear to Miss Trant, but she said she supposed it was. And after that, she thought, it would not do to ask what "Refer" meant, nor even to hint that it must be difficult to play to "enormous business" in a place called Little Sandmouth, of which she had never heard before. "But you were going to tell me something about the people here." She dropped her voice. "Who is that very tall, thin man in the loud, check suit?"

Mr. Nunn glanced across, then shook his head. "Not one of us," he whispered. "I've just been introjuced to him. Name of Mitcham. A pro. Banjo-player."

"I remember. He came in when I did, with that rather pleasant-looking, untidy youth with the lock of hair."

"That is so," said Mr. Nunn. "Not our lot at all, just visiting. But you see that other boy who's talking to 'em, that nice-looking one?" Miss Trant did see him, and had indeed been thinking for some time that he was an astonishingly handsome youth. He had a small head, carefully waved dark hair, and fine regular features, and was beautifully dressed. It was a pleasure to look at him, though Miss Trant decided she had no particular desire to know him. He was not the type of young man she admired. "That's Jerry Jerningham, our light comedian and dancer," Mr. Nunn continued. "And I don't mind telling you, he's a *find*. Works hard, got personality, puts it over all the time. You couldn't want a better dancer. If he plays his cards properly, he'll be up in the West End before long. They've only got to *see* him. The only thing is, he won't feed. I never struck a worse feed." And Mr. Nunn paused impressively.

Miss Trant stared. This seemed a curious complaint to make. "Do you mean that he won't eat?"

Mr. Nunn leaned back, banged his thigh, and gave a sudden guffaw. Then he looked grave again. "Not at all. It doesn't mean eating. Far

as that goes, there's only one member of this show that can't eat, and that's me. Got a wicked stomach—oh, downright wicked!—won't look at a thing. Bacon, eggs, ham, chops, steak and chips, bit o' pie—anything you really fancy, y'know—you wouldn't believe what they are to me. Poison, that's what they are. Give me a good supper," he pursued earnestly, "and you might as well fill me up with red-hot pins and needles. I haven't had a square meal for three years, just toast and charcoal-biscuits and beef-tea and bits of fish and chicken and jellies and shapes. And I've got to be funny on that, got to make a lot o' people laugh who are filled up with roast beef and Yorkshire and baked potatoes and greens and apple pie. Dear, dear, dear!"

He wagged his head so comically that Miss Trant had to laugh even while she was crying "What a shame!"

"But this feeding I'm talking about," Mr. Nunn went on, "is a name in the profession for working up to gags. The chap that feeds has to ask the comedian questions and get angry with him and all that. You know the business."

Yes, Miss Trant did know it.

"And I give you *my* word, Miss Trant, it's not so easy as it looks, and a comedian's got to have a good feeder. Now young Jerningham there hates it and so can't feed for nuts. That's good, isn't it?—can't feed for nuts. And properly speaking, it's his job to feed, but as luck will have it, Joe over there—he's our baritone, Courtney Brundit, but everybody calls him Joe—is as good a feed as you could wish for." He indicated a powerfully built man, with a broad and pleasantly stupid face, who was smoking a short pipe and staring at nothing. "I won't say I've not heard better baritone singers than Joe. I've heard a lot better, and so have you. But if you or anybody else told me you wanted to run this show and leave Joe out, I'd say 'Well, you can leave me out too.' That's how I feel about Joe. He's not one of the brainy ones, Joe isn't, and you'll never hear him at Covent Garden, but he's got a heart of gold. You can't rile him, and he'll do anything for a pal, Joe will. Easiest-tempered man I ever knew, and a good job too because he's as strong as a horse. He was in the Navy one time and a heavyweight champion. If you ask me, that's what started him off as a singer. If he wanted to sing, he sang, and nobody could tell him to shut up."

Mr. Nunn chuckled a little over this, then drew a long breath and became serious again.

"That's his wife there, our contralto," he began.

"What, the woman in the purple hat?" It was a peculiarly revolting purple hat and Miss Trant had been shuddering at it for some time. It completely dominated its wearer, a vague plumpish sort of woman who was knitting in a rather detached and stately manner.

"That's the one. Stella Cavendish she calls herself, but she's Mrs. Joe Brundit. Big voice, a good classy rep, plenty of experience, and a real nice woman, though a bit inclined to put it on, y'know, now and again. Keeps Joe well in hand. But they're a nice couple to work with. They've got a little boy called George—lives with his aunt in Denmark Hill—and you'd think there'd never been another kid in the world. But it's hard on them, this bust-up, I can tell you."

"And who is that young dark girl who's got such a merry face? I like the look of her." The girl in question was listening to Mr. Oakroyd, who appeared to be telling her all about his adventures.

"Ah, I was coming to her." Mr. Nunn's face brightened at once. "That's Susie—Miss Susie Dean—our comeedeeyen and the baby of the show. I knew her father and mother--both pros—dead now. That little girl's got it in her blood, absolutely born for it."

"Do you mean that she's very good?" asked Miss Trant, who was interested.

"Good! She's a wonder. Mind you, she's young, and I don't say she's nothing to learn, but she's picking it up like greased lightnin'—better ever week. There'll be no stopping Susie once she's got a toe on the ladder. If we don't see her name in electric lights in Shaftesbury Avenue before we're ten years older, I'll eat—I'll never touch another bottle of magnesia!"

"I'd like to see her on the stage," said Miss Trant, glancing across at the piquant little dark face. "She looks interesting—comical and clever. How old is she?"

"Twenty. And you can take it from me, my—Miss Trant, I mean—she *is* comical and clever. She's all over this show. The way she can get laughs! You've only got to let her sniff an audience—if it's only six free passes in four rows of chairs—and she's bubbling over. A lot of

comedians wouldn't have stood for the way she gets laughs, I can tell you—lot of jealousy in the profession, Miss Trant; it's the curse of it—but I don't mind, bless her! Susie and me's the best of pals." He looked across at the girl as he spoke, his queer lined face alight with affection; and Miss Trant, following his glance, saw the girl look up and blow a kiss to him. Miss Trant smiled, rather wistfully.

"If this show had gone as it ought," Mr. Nunn continued dejectedly, "she'd have had a big chance. Somebody'd have seen her and snapped her up. Now she'll have to take what comes, and ten to one be jumped on because she's too good for the bit of business they'll tell her to do. She's taken it well, best of the lot, Susie has, kept her spirits up all the time, but it's rotten hard lines. And I'll tell you this, Miss Trant," he was very impressive now, "I blame myself for this."

"Why surely not!" cried Miss Trant. "I don't see how it could be your fault."

"I don't suppose you do, but nevertheless you can take it from me it *is* my fault," he replied, gloomily triumphant. "Who's had most experience here? I have. I ought to have known. Who'd heard one or two queer things about Charlie Mildenhall? I had. I ought to have known. Who looked at the bookings and saw he'd gone and fixed up rentals right and left? I did. I ought to have known." He looked at her with the air of one who has made everything plain.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Miss Trant looked apologetic. "What are rentals?"

"Ah, you see, it's like this. As a rule a Concert Party works on a percentage basis. It gets—we'll say—sixty per cent of the gross takings, and the people who own the pavilion or hall or theatre or whatever it is take the other forty. Sometimes there's a guarantee—for thirty or forty pounds maybe—which means——"

"That your share will amount to at least the thirty or forty pounds," put in Miss Trant, who was no fonder of being a pupil than the next person.

"Right! Well, that's fair enough, gives everybody a chance. But we don't like renting places in the C. P. world, I can tell you, and that's what I mean by rentals. You just pay out your money and the people who's running the hall or pavilion don't care tuppence about your show

so long as they get their money. This was a rental here in Rawsley—and half of 'em was rentals, like this. I did point it out at the time, Five-and-twenty pounds! And you oughter see the place! Not worth five-and-twenty shillings! And he hadn't just taken it for one week, he'd taken it for two. Two at five-and-twenty a week, here, in this place! I ought to have known. And he showed me his dates for the autumn, and half of 'em was rentals, like this. I did point it out at the time, but I ought to have known. He never meant to stay, not him. Didn't matter to him if it was twenty-five hundred pounds a week here—he wasn't going to pay it, and he knew it—oh yes, he knew all right!" Mr. Nunn raised his voice. "They've got every prop we have, and there they stop till we can pay the fifty pounds, so we've said good-bye to 'em. We've not had a treasury for four weeks."

"Yes, Miss Longstaff told me."

"Mr. Jimmy Mug, that's me! I could kick myself from here to the dirty Assembly Rooms and back, every time I think of it." He was very excited now. "A man of my experience! And seeing those dates too! I tell you, Miss What's-it, I can't look these boys and girls in the face, I give you my word I can't." He gave a groan.

"There's Jimmy going on again," said a voice.

"Now then, Jimmy, now then!" This was from Mr. Courtney Brundit, otherwise Joe, who now came lumbering across to them. "Don't you take any notice of him, ma'm," he said to Miss Trant, and he gave Mr. Nunn a tremendous slap on the back.

"Hoi!" cried Mr. Nunn. "Steady, Joe, steady! You've got a hand like a sledge-hammer. Miss—er—Trant, this is Mr. Brundit, Courtney on the stage, and Joe off."

"Very pleased to meet you, Miss Trant," said Mr. Brundit, taking her hand in his huge fist and shaking it heartily. "Now don't you let Jimmy start blaming himself," he added in his slow good-humoured growl, "because it's no more his fault than it's my fault or anybody else's fault."

"That's all right, Joe, but——"

"But nothing, Jimmy! We can't have a chap with a stomach like yours—he's got an awful bad stomach, Miss—worst in the profession—

going and upsetting himself for nothing. Here, you people," he roared, "we're not blaming Jimmy, are we?"

"No," they chorused, to Miss Trant's astonishment.

"Who's been keeping our hearts up?" roared Joe again.

"Jimmy!" they cried.

"Good old Jimmy!" Joe prompted them.

"Good old Jimmy!" they all cried. Even Mr. Oakroyd, who was not the man to be left out of anything so hearty and friendly, came in at the end with "Ay, good owd Jimmy!"

Then before Jimmy or Joe or anyone else could make another sound, they found themselves confronted by the proprietor of these Station Refreshment Rooms, Mrs. Mounder, who stood there, terribly compressed now in face and arms and body, all erect and folded up, but with a head trembling with indignation.

"I can't do with yer," Mrs. Mounder was crying. "Not another minute! Outside, every one."

"Now then, ma," began Joe.

Mrs. Mounder glared at him. "One-and-fourpence and one-and-eightpence and two shillings, that's what one or other of yer owes me, and yer can pay me now, at once, and take yerselves somewhere else, sitting about and making yer commotion!" And from the torrent of speech that followed, they were at liberty to gather that she never, never did, couldn't keep a door open, couldn't do with them, and would show them trouble if it was trouble they were asking for. By this time she had lashed herself into such a rage that she made a mistake in her tactics. She singled out Miss Trant, crying: "You too, Miss! I thought you was different, a lady, but seemingly you're another of 'em."

"What!" cried Miss Trant.

"You 'eard what I said."

Miss Trant rose from her chair, drew herself up to her full height, and marched towards Mrs. Mounder as steadily as the old Colonel and the other fighting Trants had marched upon earthworks and counterscarps. She was pale and there was a kind of glitter in her fine clear eyes, but there was not the ghost of a tremble or a waver or a wobble.

"What did you say we owed you?" she demanded icily.

At this there was some expostulation from the company behind, but

she turned round quickly and even held up a hand: "One moment, please. I'll explain later." Then there was not a whisper among them.

She faced Mrs. Mounder again, looking her straight in the eyes. Mrs. Mounder tried to compress herself into a yet smaller, tighter, harder mass of disapproval, and when she discovered it could not be done, she began to weaken. After a sniff or two, she replied: "There's one-and-fourpence and one-and-eightpence and two shillings altogether owing, though, upon my word, what with the hot water that's been called for——"

Miss Trant cut her short. She took out a ten-shilling note and lightly tossed it towards the woman. "There you are," she said, raising her chin another inch, "and please bring me the change at once."

The note had fallen on to the floor, and Mrs. Mounder looked at it now, with her head trembling away. Miss Trant neither spoke nor moved, and the others at the back never made a sound. Then Mrs. Mounder suddenly dipped, took the note, muttered something that nobody could catch, and hurried out.

Miss Trant turned round, quite slowly this time, quite calmly, smiled vaguely at everybody, and said "Let's go now, shall we?" And off she went to the door, to receive her change and to give Mrs. Mounder a last annihilating lift of eyebrow, while the others, bursting into talk again, came trooping after her. Between the doorway and the road, where they had met before, the untidy youth with the lock of hair caught up to her and introduced himself as Inigo Jollifant. "That was magnificent, absolutely," he remarked. "But you paid for my tea, you know."

"I was going to explain to everybody why I did that," said Miss Trant. Then she hesitated.

"The gesture, of course, the gesture asked for it," said Inigo sympathetically. "One-and-fourpence here, one-and-eightpence there—no gesture! Pay for the lot—take that and get out—the only way to do it! As a matter of fact, I was thinking of that myself. But I haven't the style, you know."

Miss Trant—who suddenly felt light-hearted, free, gay—laughed. "This is my car. We'll stop here and wait for the others. The point is, though," she went on hastily, "I've suddenly decided to—to run this troupe—I mean concert party. That horrid woman decided me."

"Splendid, absolutely!" cried Inigo enthusiastically. "I was only wishing I could do it. But I've only got forty pounds to spare. I've told them, though, I was ready to join up—just for a lark, you know. I've been teaching in a prep school, but I can play the piano, and from what I can gather, my sort of piano stuff is just what they want."

"I wish you would," said Miss Trant. "I'd been wondering about it for the last half-hour and trying to find out things, and then when that woman talked like that, I suddenly thought 'All right then, I *will*.' I don't know anything about it, so nothing could be more crazy."

"Oh, hatter-mad, I agree," said Inigo cheerfully. "But a lark of colossal dimensions. And here we all are, rogues and vagabonds together."

"I'm wondering now what we ought to do," said Miss Trant, quickly, as the others came up.

"I know. Leave it to me." Inigo turned to face the entertainers, and called out: "I say, is there a place here where we might all have some supper and a sort of meeting?"

"Why, what's the idea, Jollifant?" This was from Mr. Morton Mitcham.

"The idea is, I want everybody to have supper or dinner or whatever they decide to call it, with me tonight," Inigo explained. "You see——" And he glanced at Miss Trant.

"The fact is," said Miss Trant, rather shy again now, "I'm rather thinking of—of running—the—the show. That is, if you'll let me," she added hastily.

There was an excited cry from everybody, but Miss Susie Dean was first. "You darling!" she flashed out, and then added, when the others had done: "I don't know you, but I'm sure you are." And everybody laughed at this, and Miss Trant blushed and shook her head.

"Now about this supper then?" said Inigo, after the excitement had died down.

"What about that hotel in the market-place, Jimmy?" asked Mr. Brundit. "They'd do it. Might be a bit dearish, though."

"Never mind about that," cried Inigo, who guessed that his own ideas of expense might be different from the homely Mr. Brundit's. "What is the place? Would it do?" He turned to Mr. Nunn.

"You mean The Royal Standard, don't you, Joe?" said Mr. Nunn.

"Yes, they'd do it all right. Good room upstairs too, they tell me. Though if there's a man on this earth who'd make a worse show at a supper or dinner or anything where there's real eating than me, I'd like to meet him. You know, it's all poison to me, Mr. What's-it," he said to Inigo earnestly.

"Shame! Well, then," cried Inigo, "let's say half-past seven at The Royal Standard, everybody! I'll go and fix it up. That's all right, isn't it, Miss Trant?"

Then the newcomers remembered they had rooms to find, and there was some excited talk about this. Finally, Inigo and Mr. Morton Mitcham departed with the Brundits, who thought there would be room for one of them in their own lodgings and a place for the other next door. They were accompanied by Messrs. Nunn and Jerningham. Miss Trant, having Elsie's hamper in the car, suggested that Elsie herself should come in too, and as Miss Susie Dean shared lodgings with Elsie, it was agreed that she should join them, whereupon Miss Susie scrambled in at the back, which was rather full of things, with the remark that it would do Rawsley good to see her there. So that was settled.

"Well, Miss," said a voice, gruff but diffident, perhaps a trifle wistful, "I'd better have them traps o' mine out o't'car and be getting on like."

"Oh, Mr. Oakroyd!" cried Miss Trant, who had forgotten all about him. "Where are you going?"

"Nay, I don't know fairly."

"He doesn't know where he's going," cried Miss Susie Dean excitedly. "He told me in there. Oh, he mustn't go, must he, Miss Trant?"

"Of course you mustn't go, Mr. Oakroyd. You don't want to go, do you?"

"Well"—Mr. Oakroyd rubbed his chin reflectively—"I don't say I've owt on, as you might say. But I'm nobbut i' t'road here. You can't do wi' me."

"I'm sure we can," said Miss Trant. "I'm sure there's something for you to do. Isn't there, Miss Longstaff? Isn't there, Miss Dean?"

"I'm sure I don't know really," began Miss Longstaff, who was not interested in Mr. Oakroyd and was surprised that a lady like Miss Trant should be.

"Of course there is," put in Miss Dean, who had heard already about

the Great North Road and Lily and all manner of things. "And he must come to supper, mustn't he? If he doesn't, I shan't. We'll stand outside making noises. We'll throw things at the window."

"Hurry up and get in, Mr. Oakroyd, if you can find room," Miss Trant commanded, and without another word Mr. Oakroyd did get in, and, after a struggle with the hamper and various bags, in which he was assisted energetically by Miss Dean, he did find room.

"Well," he said, his honest broad face alight as they moved down the road, "this *is* a do, this is." He ruminated for a minute or two, then, catching some droll glances that his companion shot at him out of her lively dark eyes, he grinned afresh and banged his right fist into his left palm several times. "This caps t'lot, this does."

"Tha's reight, lad," said Miss Dean coolly.

"Yond's a caution," Mr. Oakroyd told himself. Then he looked at Rawsley with the air of a man who has seen many other and better places.

II

At half-past seven that night, all our friends were assembled in the upstairs dining-room of The Royal Standard—with one exception. Miss Trant was not there. The Misses Dean and Longstaff, on being questioned, said they did not know why she was late. They had found very nice rooms for her next door but one to their own, and had left her there. She had, however, said something about a bath—"and you know what that means in these digs, my dear." Their various dears did know what it meant, and were relieved. "Though it wouldn't surprise *me* if something had happened to her, taken ill or lost her memory or all her money or something, right at the very crucial moment. That's the sort of thing that *would* happen, my dear." This was the dark verdict of Miss Stella Cavendish, otherwise Mrs. Joe Brundit, who was looking very festive and important and uncomfortable in her cerise, a dress that was rather too small for her now but had done good service some years ago during a season in "stock," when she had played the Duchess of Dorking and other great-lady parts, all with a song in the third act. But if Mrs. Joe, who had no illusions about the profession and was a great authority upon its ups-and-downs, especially the downs, was ready

to be pessimistic about the non-appearance of their possible saviour, Miss Trant, this does not mean that she was out of tune with the festive evening. The Duchess of Dorking herself could not have surveyed and approved of the arrangements in better style. She hastened to congratulate her host, Mr. Jollifant: "Everything very nice, very tasteful, I'm sure," was her verdict.

"Mrs. Tidby—she's the proprietor—said the notice was too short," replied Inigo, "but that she'd do her best. And, she said, although she was not the one to say it, nobody in this town could do better. And she insisted upon telling me all about the annual dinner of the Rawsley and West Something-or-other Horticultural Society, which has been held here since 1898. So there!"

"All very nice, very tasteful," repeated Mrs. Joe, with bland complacency, casting her eye over the table, laid for ten. "Though nobody knows better than I do," she continued archly, "that so much depends on the orderer in these affairs. Get a good orderer and what happens? Everything tasteful, nothing tawdry. How many can you trust to order? Now there's Mr. Brundit—Joe—he couldn't order, not to be satisfactory. He hasn't the manner. Joe's as gentle as a lamb and as strong as a lion, but he hasn't the manner. They'd say in a minute 'Anything'll do for *him*.' They *know*, these people, Mr. Jollifant. Now you're a gentleman. What does that mean? It means that it comes to you naturally, you're a born orderer."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Inigo protested, being the last person in the world to have any aristocratic pretensions. "I don't know that you can say that——"

"I do," said Mrs. Joe firmly, holding up her hand. "And when you've been as many years in the profession as I have, you'll know. I can tell it in a minute. I said to myself as soon as I met you: 'He's untidy; he may not have much money; he's ready for his little joke with everybody; but—he's a gentleman.' Oxford or Cambridge or Harrow, Mr. Jollifant?"

"Cambridge," said Inigo, staring.

"I knew. 'One of them,' I said to myself." She was very triumphant. "There's a *Stamp*. I've thought about it for George—that's our boy, you know. I said from the first, if that boy's bright—and you couldn't

want a brighter—and if things will allow, he goes to one of those places. I don't care, I've told Joe more than once, whether it's Cambridge College or Oxford College—I'm not one of your silly boat-race people—but to one of them, things allowing, he goes."

"Jolly good!" said Inigo heartily if a trifle absent-mindedly, for he was wondering when Miss Trant would come.

"*And* no stage. I've made up my mind about *that*. Joe says it would be nice to have him with us, and nobody knows that better than a mother, but what I say every time is that George must have his chance at something gentlemanly—a bank or estate agency. Concert singing I would *not* object to, but that depends on the Voice. So far, George has given no signs of having a Voice. If it comes, well and good. But no stage!"

"You're frightening me, Mrs. Brundit," said Inigo, smiling. "Don't forget I'm apparently just about to join the profession myself."

"Ah, that's your fun, Mr. Jollifant, I know," replied Mrs. Joe, turning her head a little to one side and raising her eyebrows. "Just a little experience for you, that's all. I believe you're a real musician."

"I'm not," said Inigo, laughing. "Anything but that. I'm just a piano-pounder. Writing's the only thing I'm really interested in."

"Writing? You have the look of an author too. Now if only I'd had the time, the things I could have written! The experience I *have* had, but never the time. What is it, Joe?" she enquired, for that gentleman was now standing at her elbow.

"It's quarter to eight, that's what it is," said Joe rather gloomily. "And Miss Trant's not here yet. I suppose she wasn't having a game with us, was she?"

"Oh, she wouldn't do a thing like that, Joe," cried his wife. "You could see at a glance she wasn't that sort. What I'm wondering is whether anything's happened to her. What if she lost her memory or was run over! Just when it seemed all right!"

"It'd be just our luck, Mag," said Joe, his face falling. They exchanged hollow stares, and for a moment or so Miss Stella Cavendish lost all resemblance to the Duchess of Dorking; she seemed to droop, to sag; she looked a tired woman who remembered she had a boy to support and that he was far away on Denmark Hill, that they had no money

and some debts, that jobs were few and getting scarcer; a woman who had said good-bye to the easy elasticity of youth. Joe coughed. "It'll turn out all right, you'll see," he began gently.

Inigo turned away, for this was no place for him. He wandered round the room, keeping one eye on the door through which Miss Trant should enter at any moment. And all his other guests were keeping an eye on that door and were beginning to look anxious, though they kept up a little buzz of talk and pretended they did not care. Mr. Jimmy Nunn had cornered the old waiter in order to tell him that the whole dinner would be regarded by Mr. Nunn's digestive apparatus as poison and nothing less, and now he had Mrs. Tidby (who had a sister who was just the same) in his audience, and appeared to be presenting the two of them with a little act in which he took the part of a too sensitive and suspicious stomach. But even he watched the door all the time. Mr. Jerry Jerningham and Mr. Oakroyd, who had discovered that they could not talk to one another, looked about them and grinned rather vaguely, but kept most of their glances for the door. Mr. Morton Mitcham, who had unearthed a larger tie and an almost clean collar for the occasion, was playing Othello to the combined Desdemona of Miss Longstaff and Miss Dean, but when Inigo approached he broke off to ask the time. "Eight o'clock, is it?" he cried. "Well, well! I just wondered, you know." His eye went round to that door and then hastily retreated. "Well, as I was saying, Miss Longstaff, Miss Dean, I only once played Jo'burg in a thunderstorm, a real thunderstorm ——"

Inigo began to feel anxious himself now. Suppose Miss Trant really didn't turn up! What a horrible fiasco this supper—as all the players called it—would be, with the show still in ruins, all their hopes scattered again! He went down the stairs, looked in several of the rooms there, then stood at the entrance for a minute or two, glancing up and down the square. When he returned he found the old waiter at the bottom of the stairs. "We're still one short," he explained. "Look here, couldn't you take some cocktails—gin and Italian or sherry and bitters or something—upstairs to those people, and ask them to help themselves." He had a cocktail himself at the bar, and no sooner had he swallowed it than he noticed a figure, an irresolute, hesitating figure, at the entrance. He rushed forward. It was Miss Trant.

"Come along, Miss Trant," he roared. "We're all waiting for you."

"I'm sorry," she stammered, still hesitating.

He stared curiously at her. What was the matter? "You know," he went on, in a lower voice, "those people upstairs—the poor old Dinky Doos—had begun to think you weren't turning up, and they were feeling very sick about it. They didn't say anything, which I thought jolly decent of them, but they were beginning to look a bit greenish, absolutely. You can't blame 'em, can you?"

"No, of course not," said Miss Trant. "And I'm sorry I've been so long. I—er—had to wait ages for a bath."

"Oh, I knew you'd come all right," said Inigo. His tone was cheerfully offhand, but he shot another curious glance at her as she came forward. "Baths, of course—well, that's asking for difficulties, isn't it?" he babbled, leading her to the stairs. "The old Rawsleyans have not quite grasped the idea of a bath yet. A panful—yes! Two panfuls—possible! But a bath, involving the contents of more than two pans or five kettles and the subsequent immersion of the human body——"

She stopped him at the foot of the stairs. "Listen, Mr. Jollifant. I feel I must tell somebody, and I think you'd understand. It's all very silly, of course——" she hesitated.

"Go on, Miss Trant," he said. "You must tell me now. As for it's being silly—well, we're all a bit silly, aren't we? I know I'm ridiculous, absolutely."

"I could have got here earlier," she began hastily, "only I suddenly discovered I wanted to—to run away. When I found myself alone again, I wondered why I had said I would go into this business. I don't know anything about it. I have some money, but not much really. And then it's all so different from the kind of life I have known. And when I thought about all this, I began to feel a bit sick about it and wanted to run away, to go back to my own kind of life, you know, to ordinary comfortable things——"

"Know! I should say I do," cried Inigo softly. "You get a crawly feeling somewhere at the bottom of your stomach, don't you?—you feel all cold and hollow inside—and then you curse yourself for having let yourself in for the thing——"

"That's it, exactly," she replied eagerly. "But surely you haven't felt like that?"

"Of course I have. This very night, for that matter! I feel like that whenever I try anything new, but I say—Down with it! You'd never do anything if you took any notice of that, would you? I mean, all this is as strange and absurd and unreal to me as it is to you, really, but I don't care."

"It's much worse, I think, for a woman. A young man can do anything for a time, it doesn't much matter——"

"And so can a woman, within reasonable limits. And this is well within 'em, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," she replied. "And if it *is* silly, I don't really mind. It's time I did something really silly. It's terrible being quiet and sensible all your life, isn't it?"

"Rather!" said Inigo, who had never tried it. "And I'm awfully glad you didn't run away, you know."

"And so am I. It was only a bit of me that wanted to, and it would have been mean and cowardly, you know, and I can't help thinking if I *had* gone, if I had sneaked back home—and I nearly did—I should have hated myself afterwards." They were climbing the stairs now. "I'm glad you understand, Mr. Jollifant." She drew a long breath, shook herself a little, then laughed. "I feel better now. Thank you."

"So do I, so don't thank me. And I'll do anything I can to help. I know nothing about this business, and I'm practically half-witted, except at times on paper—but there!"

They exchanged smiles at the top of the stairs, the smiles of two compatriots in a far and fantastic country. They were friends.

Inigo threw open the dining-room door. "Ladies and gentlemen," he roared. "Miss Trant."

A stir, a quick sigh, a buzz of welcome and a clapping of hands; and she stood for a moment or two in the doorway, looking at them all, half embarrassed, half delighted, no longer that familiar and only-to-be-expected figure, Miss Elizabeth Trant, who had stayed at the Old Hall so long that her youth had slipped by and all her bright looks been dimmed, but a mysterious Miss Trant who had popped up, come from nowhere, to save the show, and whose entrance lit up the room just

as it lit up her face. As she stood there, she felt for a moment that she was a vivid and rather delightful person, one that even a busy Scots doctor might remember with pleasure. It was a moment well worth the whole six hundred pounds that had fallen to her last week out of the blue.

"And, if you'll allow me to say so, Miss Trant," said Mrs. Joe, otherwise Miss Stella Cavendish, sweeping forward impressively, "as pretty an entrance as one could wish for. It takes me back in a flash," she told the company, "to the big scene in *The Rose of Belgravia*."

"Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen," Inigo called out.

"Now where are we going to sit, Jollifant?" asked Mr. Morton Mitcham in his most dignified manner. "Quite like old times, Mrs. Brundit."

"I should say so," cried Miss Susie Dean. "The good old times when we all played the baby in *East Lynne*—perhaps. Well, I'm going to sit next to Mr. Oakroyd, because he's shy. Aren't ta, lad?"

"Noan too shy to gi' thee a bit of a slap, lass, if tha doesn't behave thysen," replied the delighted Mr. Oakroyd in his broadest accent. "Yond's a coughdrop," he announced to the room at large, and took his place beside her.

We have never heard that The Royal Standard in Rawsley is famous for its dinners, and as Mrs. Tidby herself pointed out more than once during the evening, the notice was short, so that it would be absurd to pretend that the dinner Inigo gave that night was an exquisite and memorable repast. Nevertheless, it seemed so to the whole ten of them. There were special reasons why it should. Miss Trant enjoyed it without noticing what she was eating, not because she was not interested in food but simply because she was still excited about herself and everybody else. Inigo enjoyed it both as a meal (for his interior still remembered Washbury Manor School) and as a lark that would inevitably beget other and wilder larks. Mr. Oakroyd was rather overawed and dubious at first; there were too many knives and forks for his peace of mind; but the company of the lively Miss Susie and the sight of a large glass of beer helped to reassure him, and soon he happily stared and grinned and ate like one who had suddenly found an appetite in fairyland. As for Mr. Morton Mitcham and the other players, they enjoyed it because

it was a splendid novelty, eating at that hour, and something of a novelty, perhaps, eating at all, certainly eating steadily through four generous courses. Miss Susie Dean, who confessed that she had been living entirely on tea and bread-and-butter and brawn and apples for the past week, declared she had forgotten there was so much food in the world, and was promptly asked not to be vulgar by her colleague, Miss Longstaff, who was so determined to be ladylike that she carefully left a little of each course at the side of her plate, which was otherwise clean enough. Mr. Jerningham contrived to wear an expression of faint boredom throughout the dinner, but despatched it like an elegant wolf. Mr. Joe Brundit, who joined Mr. Oakroyd in his preference for a large glass of beer, demanded so many pieces of bread that he became an important figure in the waiter's reminiscences. But it was Mrs. Joe and Mr. Morton Mitcham who succeeded best in giving the dinner the air of being a prodigal feast. With them there seemed to be not four courses but fifty. The tomato soup, the mysterious little pieces of white fish, the boiled mutton, the blackberry and apple tart, were transformed by their histrionic gusto into a banquet of Lucullus, and they seemed to nod and smile at one another over the ruins of garnished peacocks' and nightingales' tongues. To see Mr. Mitcham fill Mrs. Joe's glass and then his own from the solitary bottle of Beaune was to catch a glimpse of the old mad bad days of the fine ladies and gentlemen who lived careless of the morrow, though the very tumbrils were rattling down the street. When they raised their glasses, the least you saw was a Viceroy or Governor-General of the old school and the Duchess of Dorking. It was a fine performance.

Even Mr. Jimmy Nunn contrived to enjoy the dinner in his own way. It was not the soup and fish and toast, to which he restricted himself, that he enjoyed, but his abstinence. As he groaned "Can't look at 'em —poison to me!", he did not seem to be refusing a little mutton and tart, but a gigantic host of dishes; waving away the very fat of the land. He referred to his stomach as if it were a haughty and eccentric guest he had brought with him. He crumbled his toast and sipped his whisky and soda ("Can't touch wine or beer") with a melancholy pride. He found time, however, to talk business with Miss Trant, who explained

briefly and rather nervously her complete ignorance and her comparative poverty.

"If you've two or three hundred you're ready to play with," said Mr. Nunn, "that'll be more than enough. With any luck, you'll have it back in no time, and after that the profit begins, and you just lean back and count the boodle. I don't mind telling you, Miss Trant, if I'd half that, I'd be running the show myself. I wouldn't be sticking to the show if I didn't believe in it. I'm not like most of these boys and girls here. I could get another engagement—as good as this, if not better—tomorrow, 'cos I'm an old hand and well known in the profession. Matter of fact, I was getting twice their money, and might have got more if I'd stuck out for it. What are you people eating now? Blackberry pie? My word, you don't know your luck. I've nearly forgotten the taste of it." He sighed hugely.

"You're not missing so much, Mr. Nunn," Miss Trant whispered. "It's not very nice. The crust's too thick and stodgy."

"It looks like Heaven to me," he lamented. "But as I was saying, I believe in the show. We all do, and if we'd had the money, we'd have wanted nothing better than to have gone on ourselves, running it on a profit-sharing basis. You see what I mean?"

"Yes, of course I do," she exclaimed. "I'm not quite so ignorant as that, you know."

"Sorry, sorry! No offence meant, Miss Trant."

"And none taken! Isn't that the phrase?" She laughed, then added, lowering her voice: "As it is, I have to pay the company's debts——"

"You're not forced to," he put in. "You're not responsible for 'em. But it 'ud be better if you did. And then we could get all the props back, too."

"Certainly. Well, I pay them, and the salaries, of course, and I suppose the expenses." She was very business-like now, and was enjoying it.

"Yes, any expenses that crop up connected with the show," he replied, "such as railway fares, baggage fees, and all that, and anything that's wanted for production numbers, special costumes and effects, you know. But not costumes for individual numbers. We get them ourselves."

"And if there's any profit, it belongs to me?"

He groaned. "That is so, but don't put it like that, Miss Trant.

Spare a poor man who's had nothing but toast and mush and a bit of a fish he's never heard of. Don't think we're going to lose money for the rest of our lives. You make me feel like a Jonah. Put it this way. You take *all* the profits."

"That does sound better, doesn't it? And of course I should like a lot of profit, heaps and heaps of money, but somehow I can't believe there will be much."

He looked very solemn and thoughtful, screwing up his face until it seemed all shining nose and upper lip. It was absurd that he should look like that and yet talk business so sensibly. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he announced at last. "I was getting ten a week—I'll show you my agreement with Mildenhall tomorrow morning——"

"No, no," cried Miss Trant. "I don't want to see it. Go on, please."

"Now, if you want me to, I'll produce for you. I'm sure none of the boys and girls would object to that. I know the business all through."

"You mean that you would rehearse everything and be responsible for the programmes? That would be splendid, Mr. Nunn. Just what I wanted! Thank you."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Trant," he said solemnly. "And not only will I produce for you—and it means a lot of extra work—but I'll drop two pounds a week, making it eight. No, listen. Instead of that two pounds, I'll take fifteen per cent of your net profits. Now I've worked that out somewhere"—he brought out his notebook—"and you'll see it means—yes, here you are—it means that I'm not making up that two pounds unless you're making over thirteen a week net profit. Mind you, I'll tell you this—you won't make it at first. Don't expect it. We've got to pull the show together, and then again this is between seasons. Summer's over and it isn't winter. And another thing, we haven't got our dates right yet. We can't take Mildenhall's dates, at least not all of 'em, 'cos they're terrible. But that'll tell you whether I believe in the show or not."

"I'm sure you do," said Miss Trant warmly. "And I'm only too glad to accept that arrangement of yours. One thing I want to change, by the way, and that's the name. I don't like it, and besides I think we ought to start all over again."

"Not a bad name, you know," he replied thoughtfully. "And it's

known. But that's up to you. We can easily find another, and as you say, make a fresh start. That might put more heart into the boys and girls. Very superstitious, us pro's, Miss Trant, and all sorts of little things bother us. Oh, and there's another thing. What about taking on these two new fellows? I've had a talk to 'em, and I advise it myself, but it's your business now, you know; you're the boss and you have 'em to pay."

"Mr. Jollifant we want, certainly," said the boss, flushing a little, "that is, if he's a good pianist. And I should think he is," she added, hopefully.

"Heard him before we came on here," said Mr. Nunn, "and he's first-class. He makes the last one we had seem like a piano-tuner in a fit. He's an amateur, but he's got real style. That other chap, Mitcham, swears by him, and he's got a lot of experience. I've heard of him before."

"He's a very queer-looking man," she said, dropping her voice. "He looks like somebody very grand and important who's all gone to seed."

Mr. Nunn shut one eye and curved a hand round his mouth. "One of the best banjoists in the profession, and a good conjurer," he whispered. "*And* one of the biggest liars. Wonderful! You have a talk to him. I don't say he hasn't seen a lot in his time, but to hear him talk you'd think he was the Wandering Jew's older brother. He's worth taking on just as a liar. Apart from that, though, he'll be worth his money all right. The conjuring'll come in as an extra, and he's just what we want for the band. We run a sort of little jazz band, you know, in the show, and a banjoist'll just make it up. I play the drums, and for a man who's forgotten what a square meal's like, I can rattle 'em a bit, I don't mind telling you." And he picked up a knife and fork and gave a little ratta-tat-tat on a plate. "Must use a knife and fork some time, eh?" he observed, at the end of the performance.

Perhaps the company thought it a signal for silence, or perhaps it was merely because the dinner was finished, but everybody stopped talking and looked rather expectantly towards Miss Trant and Mr. Nunn.

"Shall I talk to 'em?" asked Mr. Nunn.

"Yes, do," she replied. "But you ought to ask Mr. Jollifant. After

all, he's the host. Do you mind, Mr. Jollifant," she said, turning to him, "if Mr. Nunn explains now what we're going to do?"

"That's the idea of the thing," cried Inigo. "To have a feed and then a grand pow-wow of the great chiefs. The idea, absolutely! Say on, Master Nunn."

That gentleman rose to his feet. "Ladies and gentleman," he began.

"Give him a hand," cried Miss Dean, who was in high spirits. And they gave him a hand, and so enthusiastically that the waiter, who was trying, though not trying very hard, to remove the crumbs from the table, was so startled that he retired precipitately. "And not so much of the 'Ladies and gentlemen,' Jimmy!" his friend Joe called out, to the disgust of Mrs. Joe, who was sitting erect, with her head a little to one side, her eyebrows well raised and her lips pursed up, as if all Dorking was looking at its Duchess.

"Boys and girls," said Mr. Nunn, "I'm not going to say much. You've had a good dinner; I haven't; and you ought to do the talking. I only want to say that Miss Trant here, as you know, is going to run the show——"

Applause for Miss Trant, in which the speaker himself joins heartily. The lady smiles confusedly, blushes, and for a moment or two wishes herself back at Hitherton.

"And we're going to turn it into the best little Concert Party on the road today," Jimmy continued. "We're lucky to have Miss Trant behind us. I think you'll think with me that Miss Trant'll think—half a minute, I'm getting too many 'thinks' in here, can't move for 'em. What I mean is, I hope Miss Trant will think soon she's been lucky too, to come across such a show." Cries of "Hear, hear!" and more applause. "You'll all be glad to know that we're completing the party at once. Mr. Morton Mitcham is joining us, and Mr. Mitcham, both on the banjo and with the cards, is an artiste of great talent and long and wide and —er—thick experience——"

"Four times round the world," that gentleman puts in, taking care to say it so that everybody will hear and yet contriving to appear as if he has merely spoken his thought aloud.

"Four times round the world," Mr. Nunn repeats, with a certain droll emphasis, "having played in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, Australia,

and the Isle o' Man. Am I right, sir?" Laughter and more applause. "Also, the place of the late pianist——"

"A nasty fumbler if there ever was one," remarks Mrs. Joe with great bitterness.

"Will be taken by Mr. Inigo Jollifant, who is new to the profession but is a first-class pianist as those of you who have heard him will testify. I ask you to remember too, boys and girls, that this is Mr. Jollifant's supper, though as far as I'm concerned, there hasn't been a supper. But you've all had one, and a good one."

More laughter and still more applause. Mr. Jollifant bows his acknowledgments, and seeing a welcoming smile on the face of Miss Susie Dean, he directs at her a specially companionable grin, only to discover that it is received with a haughty and disdainful stare. When he looks again he finds Miss Dean is pointedly drooping an eyelid at Miss Elsie Longstaff, and he comes to the conclusion that he has just been guyed by this dark and lively young lady.

Mr. Nunn has stopped, to confer in whispers with Miss Trant, who nods her head rapidly. The table is all attention.

"Look hare, what about——" begins Mr. Jerry Jerningham, but he gets no further, being fiercely requested by several of his colleagues to "shush."

"Now then," remarks Mr. Nunn, "there's just one or two points. As you boys and girls know, there's no reason why Miss Trant should pay any salaries at all until we start working again. But"—here Mr. Nunn takes a deep breath, and everybody looks relieved—"but she says she is willing to pay two weeks' money to all the old members of the party, that is, everybody but the two who've just joined. That means we're being paid for this week and last. And there'll be no cutting. Salaries the same as before." Here Mr. Nunn, who is too old a hand not to know when applause is coming, stops speaking. He is not disappointed.

There is, however, a dissentient. It is Mr. Jerry Jerningham, who now raises his beautiful head to voice a protest. "Look hare, Jaymy, thet's all raight about the two weeks' meney. Quaite generous, and all thet." (Here we must break in to say that though there is no more graceful and exquisite young man in the Midlands than Mr. Jerningham, his accent, a comparatively recent acquisition, unfortunately demands this

kind of spelling. It is one thing to look at Mr. Jerningham, and quite another thing to listen to him. The thousands who have crowded in from Shaftesbury Avenue since then to see Jerry Jerningham will not recognise this accent, for the simple reason that he afterwards dropped it and then picked up another during his successful season on Broadway. Even the one we are trying to capture now was the third accent he had had since he quitted, at the age of seventeen, the outfitter's shop in Birmingham.) "But Ai cawn't agree to the same selery. Ai told Mildenhall Ai wasn't getting enough, considering the way mai ect was going, and he agreed——"

"Yes, you idiot," Miss Susie cries heatedly. "He'd agree to anything, considering-thet-he-wasn't-going-to-pay-you-anything-et-all. Fancy bringing that up! You're acting like a measly little Sheeny, Jerry Jerningham."

"Just maind your own business, Susie," he replies. "Nobody esked you to bett in. Ai'm talking to Miss Trarnt and Jaymy."

And neither Miss Trant nor Jimmy is looking with any great favour upon him. Both of them, indeed, are annoyed, and Miss Trant is quite ready to tell the beautiful youth that if he is not satisfied he can go. She glances with approval at the outspoken Susie. Jimmy is purpler than usual and might have been heard, a moment ago, muttering "Little blighter," but after a swift whispered aside to Miss Trant--"He's good, you know. Must try and keep him"—he now adopts a conciliatory attitude. Jerry has said that he is worth more than he is getting. All the boys and girls know that. They know that Jerry has been putting it across in great style, and will put it across in even greater style very soon. But the boys and girls will agree with him, Jimmy Nunn, that in times like these an artiste cannot get what he is worth and is sometimes lucky to get anything at all. Things being what they were, Jerry must keep on at the old rate, like the rest of them. If Jerry's big chance came he could take it. Miss Trant was not going to bind any of them down. She was playing fair with them, and they would play fair with her. To all this the boys and girls gave a hearty assent, and Mr. Jerningham, whose chief desire had been to call attention to his own importance, gracefully signified that he would condescend to join them at the same salary as before.

"What's the programme then now, Jimmy?" Mr. Brundit calls out, in a voice that reminds everybody once again that many-brave-hearts-are-asleep-in-the-deep-so-beware. "Got to start again, haven't we?"

"I'm coming to that now, Joseph," Mr. Nunn informs him. "First thing, then—rehearsals. We've got to rehearse as if we'd never seen one another. Isn't that so? Well, what I propose is this—and, by the way, I ought to have said that Miss Trant wants me to produce for her and be the general big noise until she's got her hand in—we stop here and rehearse."

There are groans from the boys and girls, who have had quite enough of Rawsley. "A place," Mrs. Joe observed, "that would take the blood out of a stone."

"That's all right. I know how you feel about it," Jimmy continues, "and I'm all for the first train out myself. But one thing you've got to remember. We can't have a Treasury tomorrow—a little sub might be managed, that's all—because Miss Trant's got to have time to get her money through. It'll be Saturday or Monday before the ghost walks. And we'll have to settle up before we go. The other thing is, we've got the use of the hall this week and can rehearse there, and might get the use of it in the mornings and afternoons for a pound or two or for nothing if we stick out for it when we pay up, for part of next week. The date for next week's already cancelled. We could get a two or three night stand between here and Sandybay, where we're going the week after, and try out the new show then. How's that? Oh, and another thing! We're going to change the name. Miss Trant doesn't like the one we've got and anyhow we ought to start afresh with another one —change the luck, y'know. Now, any ideas for a new name?"

Several of them suggest names, all of which, it is triumphantly proved, have been used before—"for ages, my dear, simply ages." Mr. Joe Brundit (it is impossible to call him Courtney at such a moment) quite solemnly proposes they should call themselves "The Mugs"—he calls this "catchy"—but is at once howled down. His wife brings out "The Duennas," admits that she has forgotten what a Duenna is, but points out that it has a fine operatic flavour. Summarily rejected. Mr. Morton Mitcham is heard remarking that "The Wallahs," the name of a troupe he coached at either Simla or Bangalore in Nought Five, might be

revived. His suggestion not meeting with approval, he rises—looking, as Miss Dean observes, as if he is never going to stop—and after clearing his throat in a very impressive manner and lowering his gigantic eyebrows at those persons who are still talking, he says: "Miss Trant, ladies and gentlemen. While we are cudgelling our brains to find a suitable name for the show, I propose—as I have proposed on many occasions in many different parts of the world before today—that we should—er—exhibit our appreciation, that is, display our grateful thanks, to our host, my friend, and your new colleague, Mr. Inigo Jollifant. Mr. Jollifant and I have already had some—er—interesting experiences together, have gone through bad times and good times. We met—er—in extraordinary circumstances—as Mr. Jollifant will remember." He paused, and everybody stared at Inigo, who began to feel that he and Mitcham must really have wandered across whole continents together. There was something compelling about Mitcham's epical imagination. "And on that occasion, after a very short acquaintance, I told him he was a trouper, a good trouper. Those of you who are not—er—familiar with the Transatlantic Stage may not know the term. It is one, I may say, of the highest praise. I knew then that our friend, Mr. Jollifant, was a good trouper. He has proved to all of you, ladies and gentlemen, tonight that he is a good trouper. And I propose that we all show our appreciation. Mr. Jollifant!"

And they all do show their appreciation. Mr. Jollifant is called upon to reply. He grins, thrusts back his lock of hair, grins again, and puts back the lock in its usual place. It is, he stammers, awfully good of everybody. He is overwhelmed, absolutely. He is not sure what a trouper is. His knowledge of America is very small and is chiefly derived from a study of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Here he is interrupted by no less a person than Miss Trant, with whom *Huckleberry Finn* is a very old favourite indeed, and who now boldly claps her hands and cries "Isn't it glorious?"

"Isn't it!" Inigo replies, and looks for a moment as if he is about to sit down and spend the next half-hour talking to Miss Trant about that masterpiece. Then he remembers he is making a speech. "As I said before, I'm not very sure what a trouper is, except that he or she is one who—er—troupes. Therefore, I don't exactly know what constitutes a

good trouper. But if it means being a good companion, or trying to be a good companion, then I'm proud to be called one, absolutely. Somehow"—he was in earnest now, saying for once something that was very real and important, felt in the heart, and not being, in spite of all his easy chatter, one of that rapidly increasing horde of glib self-confessors, he could only stammer it out—"somehow—there isn't too much—er—good companionship left—is there? I mean—people don't sort of—pull together now much, do they? Everybody's—well, not everybody, but a lot of people—are out for a good time—and that's all right, of course; I'm all for it; the more the merrier, so to speak—but it's nearly always their own good time and nobody else's they're out after, isn't it? An awful lot of hard nuts about now, somehow—and only soft in the wrong places. Well, of course, I'm not any better than anybody else, bit worse, I dare say, but I'd like one or two people to say I was a good companion. That's one of the things that's attracted me about this what's it—concert party; a good crowd sticking together. That's where the fun really comes in, isn't it? Look here, I'm making an awful mess of this, y'know. I can gas but I can't really talk—but"—he ends with a sudden burst—"I could write it, and I will do before long. Thanks very much."

"Listen, everybody," Miss Trant calls out at once. "Mr. Jollifant has given me the name. I'm sure it's never been used before. We'll call ourselves *The Good Companions*. What do you think of that?" She is very excited now.

The Good Companions. They are all turning it over and over, tasting it.

Inigo approves of it at once and with enthusiasm.

"I like it too," cries Miss Susie Dean. "It's original, and it does mean something, not like the ridiculous 'Dinky Doos.' That always made me feel as if I was something between a scented cigarette and one of those sixpenny packets of dye that Elsie here's always using. I like the sound of this new name. I don't know how it will look on the bills, though," she concludes doubtfully.

"I do," Mrs. Joe announces in a very deep and gloomy voice. "It will look rotten on the bills."

"I agree. Not enough *dash* about it, if you ask me," says Miss Elsie Longstaff, who is all for dash.

"Too haybrow, Miss Trarnt," is Mr. Jerningham's comment.

Mr. Nunn closes one eye over it, then the other, and finally declares it is a bit on the stiff side and won't space well on the bills—but—it is out of the common and will do. Mr. Mitcham comes down on the same side with all the weight of his experience. The combined enthusiasm of Miss Trant and Inigo is more than a match for the vague doubts and fears of the others.

"There it is then," Miss Trant calls out in her clear voice. "We'll call ourselves *The Good Companions.*"

Here Mr. Mitcham has an inspiration. After saying to Inigo "Now this is *mine,*" he rises to his full height and thunders: "Waiter. Where are you, waiter? Ah, there you are. Waiter, I want a bottle of port."

"Now what kind would you like, sir?" the waiter enquires, quite anxiously, as if the cellar is stocked with all manner of ports and he is gravely concerned lest the gentleman should not have exactly the right one.

"Oh, something drinkable. What have you got?"

"Well, we've the Tawny at three-and-nine the bottle, and we've the Old and Crusted at four-and-six."

"Than bring a bottle of the Old and Crusted," and Mr. Mitcham gives such richness to his vowel sounds that already the wine seems twice as old and crusted as it was before. "And glasses round," he continues, "as quick as you can." After almost chasing the waiter out of the room with his eyebrows, Mr. Mitcham sits down with the air of a man who not only knows a good wine but also knows how to order a good wine.

"Now he'd make a wonderful feed if I can get him going. Got just the style," Mr. Nunn whispers to his neighbour, Miss Trant. "And I've got a sketch or two that he can walk away with, right from the word 'go.'"

The Old and Crusted has arrived and so have the glasses. "I'm going to give you a toast in a minute," says Mr. Mitcham, "so fill up, everybody." When they are ready, he lifts his glass and cries in a voice of such majesty that it brings Mrs. Tidby upstairs from the bar: "My friends, I give you *'The Good Companions.'* Long life and good luck to 'em."

"I'll drink this," Mr. Nunn declares, "if it kills me." And down goes his Old and Crusted with the rest.

"The Good Companions!"

Mrs. Tidby, nodding and smiling at the door, is invited in to drink the health of the new show, which she does with great gusto, smacking her lips over the Old and Crusted to indicate perhaps that there is nothing wrong with it.

It is now Mr. Oakroyd's turn. Up to now he has been quiet because he is a diffident man and rather out of his element. All the others are members of the party, but he is only a guest. There had been some talk outside that tea-place about him doing something, but nothing has been said since and he is not one to push himself in where he isn't wanted. Tomorrow he will be wandering on his way again, but he has enjoyed tonight, and must say something to them all before they separate. So now he raises the large glass, which still has an inch of beer in it, and cries to them all: "Well, I'm nobbut one o' t'audience, as you might say. But this is my bit. May you mak' good companions o' t'fowk as comes to see and hear you, and nivver look back." And down went the inch of beer.

"Thank you, Mr. Oakroyd," Miss Trant calls out before anybody else could reply. And then she begins speaking in a low voice to Mr. Nunn.

Miss Dean, who seems to regard Mr. Oakroyd as her protégé, is delighted. "Isn't he sweet?" she cries across the table, and turns to look at him, with her head tilted to one side. "You *are* sweet, you know, Mr. Oakroyd, aren't you?" And her glance suggests that he is about six inches high and covered with pink icing.

But Mr. Oakroyd is now summoned to the end of the table, where Miss Trant and Mr. Nunn are in conference. He exchanges places with Inigo, who seems rather pleased to find himself next to Miss Dean, still smiling and altogether very attractive.

"Now listen, Mr. Oakroyd," Miss Trant is saying. "Mr. Nunn says that a handyman like you would be very useful to us——"

"Stage carpenter, props and baggage man, lights, doorman where needed, bill-poster where needed," Mr. Nunn rattles off this list with an easy air. "And of course any odd jobs."

"Ay." Mr. Oakroyd rubs his chin. You would not suppose for a

moment that he is delighted. "Well, I know nowt about the-aters, nowt at all but what you can see from t'gallery. I could pick a deal up, I dare say. I can do owt I want to do wi' my hands as a rule. Is it summat you want doing or a reg'lar job?"

"We want you to travel round with us, Mr. Oakroyd, as our handy-man," Miss Trant explained. "And I'm sure you'd soon learn anything you didn't know that had to be known. About lights, for instance."

A grin slowly broadens over Mr. Oakroyd's face. "One o' t'*Good Companions,* eh? By gow, I'll have a do at it, I will an' all."

"And Mr. Nunn suggests three pounds a week——"

"Plus train fares and any extra expenses," Mr. Nunn adds. "And good money too. Coming in regularly—very good money."

"Would that be all right, Mr. Oakroyd?"

"Eh, I should think so, Miss. Three pund i' t'week and nobbut mysen to keep! Nivver thowt I'd end up as a the-ater chap! This beats t'band, this does." And he chuckles away.

"That's all right, then, is it? Will you come down to the Assembly Rooms in the morning, Mr. Oakroyd?"

"Nobbut say t'word," says Mr. Oakroyd earnestly, "and I'll be down at half-past six wi' my tools."

"Half-past six!" Mr. Nunn gives a capital imitation of a gentleman who has just received a severe blow at the back of the head. "There isn't such a time, not in the morning—never heard of it—don't believe it exists. Nay, lad. Half-past ten's our time."

"Day's half ower i' Bruddersford by then. Happen you know Bruddersford, Mr. Nunn?"

"I do know Bruddersford," Mr. Nunn replies in tragic accents. "Everybody knows it, except the lucky ones. Ask Susie there about it. She calls it 'Shuddersford.' It's generally known to the profession though as 'The Comedian's Grave!'"

"Eh, whativver for?" enquires Mr. Oakroyd, his face quite wooden. "I've heard tell of 'em calling it t'place where they hammer screws. You hear all sorts, don't you, Mr. Nunn?" And he leans back in his chair and calmly stares at the ceiling.

Miss Trant, after looking at the pair of them, laughs a little, and Mr. Nunn laughs too, and then Mr. Oakroyd begins to chuckle again.

"They're a bit o' good company, this lot," he tells himself, and when he remembers that he is not leaving them tomorrow but is going to travel all over the place and do odd jobs and have three pounds a week, he feels ready to burst.

Now they are calling "Miss Trant. Spee-eech, Miss Trant. Spee-eech." At first she shakes her head, but the boys and girls will take no refusal, as Mr. Nunn is careful to point out to her.

"I haven't anything to say at all, you know," she tells them, "except that I'm sure we shall all get on very well together. You must forgive me if I make mistakes or say anything silly, because, as you know, I don't really understand this business. I haven't even seen you on the stage, which is rather absurd, isn't it? But I'm sure you're all very clever and work very hard and—and—tomorrow and afterwards when you're Good Companions you'll be cleverer still and work harder." Laughter and applause. "And now I'm going to bed. Yes, I am. I've had an awfully long and exciting day—it seems to have lasted about a week—and now I'm tired."

"Oh, don't go, Miss Trant," Susie implores.

"Why not?"

"Well, if you go, I shall feel I ought to go too, and though I'm tired-ish too, I hate to think I'm missing anything."

"I'm ready to go, Susie," Miss Longstaff tells her.

"Oh, all right then," cries Susie. "I suppose all us feemiles had better trot off together, and leave the men to stay here until they're kicked out. Can't you just see them here when we've gone—going yaw-yaw-yaw and haw-haw-haw and all of 'em nearly dying of conceit? I do think men are ridiculous," she concludes, putting her nose in the air.

"You stick fast to that opinion of the men, my dear," Mrs. Joe tells her, "and you might have a chance of getting to the top of the tree." And with that, the good lady rises, informs her husband that he can have another glass and no more, and stay just half an hour, then departs with the other three members of her sex.

And the men, sitting down again with that fine careless ease that comes when the women go, do have another and do yaw-yaw-yaw and haw-haw-haw, and while they are doing that, Inigo discovers that Jerry Jerningham, with his good looks and grace and weird accent, his deter-

mination to top the bill and have his name in electric lights before long or perish, his grave and almost ascetic devotion to his flimsy little art, is altogether an astonishing person; and Mr. Oakroyd discovers that Joe, whom he recognises at once as a man after his own heart, is not only partial to a pipe of *Old Salt* (to say nothing of a glass of beer) but is also a fellow enthusiast in the matter of football, at which little George will very soon distinguish himself—and surprise some of 'em, it appears —at Denmark Hill; and Jimmy Nunn and Morton Mitcham discover that they remember any number of "pros" who have got there or dropped out or lifted an elbow too often or gone into management or taken a nice little pub somewhere. Mrs. Tidby reappears, to hope everything was to their liking and to point out once again that the notice was short, and then to glance significantly at the clock. The old waiter yawns, pushes a few glasses about in an aimless fashion, returns with change on a little wet tray, smiles vaguely when told to keep it, then yawns again. They troop out into the deserted streets and stop a minute, with a faint shrinking sense of irony, to look up at the thinning clouds and the mild stars beyond. "You going my way? Right you are. Good night, boys. Good night, ol' man. Goo' night."

Chapter Two

VERY SHORT, AND DEVOTED TO REHEARSALS

Inigo seemed to spend all his waking hours, the next few days, on the improvised stage at the Rawsley Assembly Rooms, pounding away on the ancient Broadwood Grand. Two of the notes, the first G in the treble and the lower D in the bass, were in the habit of sticking, and even by the end of the first day he had come to know those two notes so well that they had taken on a personal life of their own, so that he appeared to have spent hours quarrelling with two obstinate little yellow men: Tweedlegee and Twoodledee, he called them. His wrists and forearms began aching by about twelve on Friday morning, and after that—though Sunday was a holiday—they went on aching until at last he forgot to notice them. It did not matter whether the Good Companions sang choruses, quartets, trios, duets, or individual numbers, he had to be at work. And if they stopped singing and took to dancing instead, then he had to work all the harder. For him there was no rest. Each member of the troupe prided himself or herself on having a large répertoire, known always as a "rep," and insisted on going through it at some time or other with the new pianist, who soon began to dislike the very mention of "reps."

"I never knew there were so many dirty tattered old sheets of music left in the world," Inigo confided to Miss Trant. This was after he had struggled through Jimmy Nunn's rep, which was the dirtiest, oldest, and most tattered of all. Many of Jimmy's songs, which did little more than announce that their singer was a policeman ("When you're going down the street, You will see me on my beat, For I'm a Policeman—*pom*—Yes, I'm a Policeman") or a postman or a waiter or some other droll public character, were in manuscript, and were further complicated by instructions scrawled in in pencil—"Stop for patter," and so forth. Fortunately it did not matter very much what he played for Jimmy, who had no ear and no singing voice, and only demanded that the accom-

paniment should stop in various odd places in order that he should be able to point out that his father was a very mean man, or describe, with a wealth of unlikely detail, his wedding day. Indeed, the relation between Jimmy's singing and the piano was so vague that he had sung a whole verse of a policeman song to the accompaniment intended for a postman before either he or Inigo had noticed the mistake. "Have to use the old uns, my boy," said Jimmy, carefully removing from the piano a sheet that was dropping to pieces. "They don't write real comic songs now, you can take it from me." And Inigo was quite ready to agree that these masterpieces had obviously been written a great many years ago. His only hope was that he would be able to vamp the accompaniments by heart before most of the scores crumbled away altogether.

The respective reps of the two Brundits were in rather better condition than Jimmy's, being mostly composed of well-printed ballads, but they were far larger, especially Mrs. Joe's, a very stout portfolio with "Miss Stella Cavendish" printed on it in scarlet letters. "I don't think there's a bigger and classier rep on the C. P. stage today," she told him proudly. But it was not necessary to go through it all. Inigo was a quick reader and found this easy ballad stuff mere child's play. After Mrs. Joe, with flashing eye and heaving bosom, had tunefully cautioned a son o' hers against doing something or other, had suggested that the roses in her heart would never bloom again like the roses in her garden, had commanded the red sun to sink in-toe the We-est, had waited for one Angus McaDonald to return from some mysterious campaign, had said goodbye to leaves and trees and kisses on the brow and practically everything, and had finally announced that she must go down to the sea again; in short, after Mrs. Joe had tried over about half a dozen of her most popular numbers, she expressed herself as being not only satisfied but delighted, mopped her face with one hand and patted Inigo on the shoulder with the other, and told him he was a pianist with a touch, a talent, a soul, and in short was a downright find. "You've got just the style for me, Mr. Jollifant," she cried warmly, and asked everybody present to agree with her. Inigo, who had been quietly enjoying himself by indulging in an ironical over-emphasis, looked round to see that Miss Susie Dean, who was standing near, was regarding him with a cool and speculative eye. At once the praise of the simple songstress

made him feel uncomfortable. He glanced apologetically towards Susie —he thought of her now as Susie—but that young lady immediately tilted her nose a little higher than usual and looked away. Inigo then came to the conclusion that he was not such a clever young man as he had imagined himself to be.

Joe gave Inigo more trouble than Mrs. Joe had done, though his rep was neither so big nor so classy. "Joe's got the Voice but not the Training," his wife explained. "And if he's not going to get off the note again, he'll have to have some of his numbers transposed. I told that to the creature that ran off with Mildenhall, but of course it was no use talking to *her*. She couldn't play a straight accompaniment, let alone transpose. As I told Joe this morning, you're a real musician, so you won't mind putting some of his numbers down a semi-tone or a tone." And Inigo did put some of them down a semi-tone or a tone, but nobody except Mrs. Joe, who was quite triumphant, even imagined it made any difference. Joe's rough, powerful voice still refused to keep on the note; towards the end of a song it wavered between several different notes; and usually at the very end it wandered into another key altogether. Moreover, it cannot be denied that Joe was a very wooden vocalist. He stiffened his massive body, clenched his fists, and roared until he was purple in the face. It was not so bad when his themes were nautical and it was his duty to point out the various perils of the de-ee-eep, but when he tried to turn himself into a melodious victim of the tender passion, when he declared that he heard you whisper his name among the roses or admitted that he had been standing 'neath your window in the moonlight or confessed that he thought of nothing night and day but two bright eyes and two white arms, and stood there bellowing, fifteen stone of taut muscle and stiff bone, with his big chin jutting out, his forehead gemmed with beads of perspiration, and his two fists apparently ready at any moment to deliver a knock-out, then it was very hard indeed not to smile at honest Joe. Miss Trant, who chanced to enter the hall when one of his love lyrics was in full blast, had to retire to the back so that he would not catch sight of her face. "What on earth makes Mr. Brundit sing love songs?" she asked Susie afterwards. "I don't mind what he sings, of course, but anybody less love-sick I can't imagine." Susie laughed. "I know. Poor Joe!—he sounds as if he's

shouting for steak and onions, doesn't he? Mrs. Joe—our Stella—makes him sing them. They don't go down badly, either. People must think it hurts him more than it hurts them, so they give him a hand. I adore Joe, though. He's a lot nicer than the men who *can* sing love songs, I can tell you. I've known some of them. Ugh!"

When the two girls of the party came to rehearse their individual numbers with him, Inigo had an unpleasant surprise. He found that he enjoyed playing to Elsie more than he did to Susie. Elsie came first and ran through about half a dozen songs, mostly of American origin, songs at once plaintive and impudent, in which somebody had either never had a "sweetie" or had just lost one. Elsie sang these in a little tinny nasal voice that seemed itself an importation from the United States, and after the last two she danced in quite an engaging and graceful fashion, making the most of her shapely self. To Inigo, looking over the piano at her as soon as he could dispense with the few repeated bars of music that accompanied the dance-steps, she seemed very attractive, in spite of the fact that he had always thought her too fair and fluffy, too saucer-eyed, too scented, at once too demure and too flaunting, too much the ageing kitten, and had never had five minutes' amusing talk with her. Until then, indeed, he had seen her as a rather silly and empty woman—and, after all, she was a woman, several years his senior—and had set her down as "affected and cosmeticated, and a bit hard and mean inside." But now, when she twirled away, smiled at him, cried "Quicker, please," smiled again as they increased the pace together, she seemed to have distinct charm, and he saw an audience warming to her act, thin and conventional though it might be. And when, at the end, pink and rather breathless, she clapped her hands and came over to him, crying "Oh, thanks ever so much! That was topping. You do play beautifully, don't you?", and he replied "That was fun, wasn't it, Miss Longstaff?", and she said that she couldn't be Miss Longstaff any longer but must be Elsie and he must be Inigo—then he began to feel they were really friends.

This was a surprise but not unpleasant. It was Susie who surprised him unpleasantly. To begin with, she was so disappointing. Jimmy Nunn, the Brundits, and even Jerningham, had all told him how wonderful Susie was; easily the best little comedienne on the Concert Party

stage, they said, and a coming star on any stage; not simply hard-working and clever with a touch or two of originality but—you know. And he knew. He had watched her closely ever since they first met, which was only last Thursday but already seemed months ago, and was only too willing to believe anything they said of her. He could see her on the stage—the nimble but sturdy figure of her, the piquant dark face, flashing with fun, and the performance itself, a rush of high spirits, a mixture of charm and drollery with just a glint, the tiniest glint, of pathos. And then when she came to rehearse with him, it was not like that at all. She sang a few songs in a husky little voice; they were poor things, flimsier than Elsie's, even, and she went through them listlessly, half-heartedly. She did a little step-dancing, but that was half-hearted too. Now and again she stopped him: he was too slow, too fast, or he must halt in such a place. That was all. It was woefully disappointing.

"I say," he began, when she had done and was putting her music together.

"Well, what is it, Professor?"

"Those songs of yours—they're not much good, are they?" He saw her opening her eyes to stare at him. "I mean—pretty feeble—eh?"

"Oh, do you think so?" There was rising and dangerous inflection in her voice.

"Rather! Thin stuff, tissue paper, absolutely! You must get fed up singing 'em, don't you? Quite apart from the words, think of the tunes. What are they? Lord, I could invent half-a-dozen better ones in a morning."

"Could you really?"

"With ease," the rash young man continued. "I don't say mine wouldn't be tripe, but there's tripe and tripe, isn't there?"

"I suppose so," she said, softly now. "I never touch it myself. But go on, please, go on."

"Well, I mean to say," he went on, a little less sure of himself, "if those things are the best that are going, we'll pension 'em off and concoct some of our own. What d'you think?"

"I'll tell you what I think," she said fiercely. "I think you've got a damned cheek. Now then! Sitting there coolly telling me my songs are all rot! And you haven't been in the show five minutes. Never seen

an audience in your life! D'you think I'm in your—your—infant class! Oh yerse," she went on, holding up her head and speaking in a throaty voice that was a vindictive imitation of Inigo's, "ther's trape and trape, isn't ther? Oh, ab-so-lutely!" Then, with a furious sweep, she turned and caught sight of Jimmy Nunn, who was in conference in the body of the hall. "Jimmy," she called, "just a minute, Jimmy. You'll perhaps be sorry to hear that I shan't be able to appear in the show. No, impossible! Mr. Jollifant, who's so kindly condescended to play for us, says my songs aren't worth playing."

"I didn't," Inigo protested.

"Yes, of course you did," she retorted. "And what I'd like to know is—who do you think you are? The last pianist we had was pretty foul, but at least she didn't tell us what we had to sing."

"Now then, you kids," Jimmy called to them. "Remember you're going to have something tasty for your tea, and I'm not. Pity poor James! Ease up, Susie. And you apologise, Jollifant. I don't care if you haven't done anything, say you're sorry. It's the only way with 'em. Take it easy, the pair of you."

"I'm awfully sorry, Susie——"

"Miss Dean, thank you."

"All right. Miss Dean, then," replied Inigo with dignity. "I repeat: I'm awfully sorry if I've offended you. I didn't mean to."

"Yes, that's the only way with 'em, isn't it? Well, it isn't with me." Susie picked up her music. "I'm sorry you don't like these numbers because you're going to hear them quite a lot. Anyhow, I'm going to sing them. And if you wrote the best soubrette songs in the world, here and now, I wouldn't sing them, not if you paid me to sing them. And that's that." And off she marched, her head in the air.

Jimmy came up a few minutes afterwards, and Inigo told him what had happened. Jimmy whistled for a minute, then puckered up his face and looked drolly at his companion. "There's one thing they didn't teach you at Cambridge, my boy," he said finally, "and it's something you'll have to learn at this job. That's tact. Don't say these things. Think 'em but don't put 'em in the book of words. In this profession, the men are bad enough. But the women! Touchy! Dynamite, my boy. One word and up they go! Besides, Susie's numbers are good

enough. I don't say they couldn't be better. But you see what she does with 'em on the night. They all eat out of her hand."

"But that's the point," said Inigo. "I should never have said anything —this is between ourselves—if I hadn't been so disappointed. I expected something wonderful from her, and I thought she was awfully dull."

On hearing this, Jimmy gave an excellent imitation of a distinguished astronomer who has just been told that the world is flat. He groaned; he looked heavenwards; he beat his brow. "What d'you think this is?" he cried, waving a hand at the empty hall. "A command performance? D'you think them chairs with the bit of plush left on are the Royal Family? D'you think that pillar there's Sir Oswald Stoll, with his pockets full of new contracts?"

"Let me take a turn at this," cried Inigo, good humouredly enough, though in truth he was still rather nettled. "And do I think this piano is the box office of Drury Lane? The answer is—I don't. And what then?"

Jimmy laughed. "Only this. Susie wasn't bothering, that's all. Wait till you see her in front of an audience. I tell you, she can make a hit with the duddest number you ever shut your ears to. Leave it to her, my boy. Susie's all right."

"I see." Inigo played a little phrase, softly, reflectively, then ended with a sudden crash. "You can expect some songs from me now, Jimmy, that is, if we can get some words. The tunes come easily enough, but I can't write the sort of stuff they want as words for them."

"If my inside lets me alone for a day or two," said Jimmy, "I can do a bit that way myself. We'll get together and fit 'em in. This is how it works. If you've got a good melody, then I'll try to find words for it. If I've a likely lyric, you try to find a tune. And don't forget to try your hand on that opening chorus I've got ready."

"Right you are. I'm going to show Miss Susie that I wasn't exactly talking through my hat just now. She said she wouldn't dream of singing anything I ever wrote. We'll see about that. I'll write something that'll make her eat her words, or I'll bust." And, so fired by the scorn of Susie, who must be *shown,* he set to work in earnest, and the two of them spent all the next day, Sunday, with a wreck of a cottage piano,

the pride of Jimmy's lodgings, and some music manuscript paper that Jimmy had unearthed.

On Monday morning, Inigo rehearsed with Jerry Jerningham, who carefully divested himself of his coat and waistcoat and then, for the next hour, worked like the nigger of legend. His voice was no better than it is now, was indeed the same plaintive and rather nasal croon, hardly worth calling a voice at all, yet most artfully adapted for the work it had to do. Jazz, which had begun as an explosion of barbaric high spirits, a splash of crimson and black on a drab globe, had become civilised; it was quieter, more subtle, and flirted with sentiment and cynicism; its first bold colours faded to autumnal tints; its butterfly gaieties were for ever fluttering down into melancholy; its insistent rhythms were like the soft plug-plugging of those great machines that now keep whole populations waiting upon them, devouring so much of people's time and yet leaving their minds partly free to wander—and to wonder; and in its own crude, jigging, glancing fashion, as it sang with a grin and shrug of home and love to the crowds of the homeless and unloved, it contrived to express all the sense of baffled desire and the sad nostalgia of the age. History, which attends to folk songs as well as the migrations of peoples, had produced this Jazz, and Nature, working obscurely in a long dark street in a Midland city, had produced a Jerry Jerningham, this Antinous in evening dress and dancing slippers, to match the event. Jerry's voice was nothing, yet it would have been impossible to find a better for these songs. And his feet, those two astonishingly energetic and versatile commentators, said all the rest. As soon as he began pit-patting with those feet, Jerry suddenly became a real person, confessing things, making original remarks about life. His feet pondered, sank into despair, began to hope, took courage, laughed and carolled, became crazed with happiness, were touched with doubt, wondered uneasily, shrugged and turned cynical, all with a seemingly careless grace.

Inigo had found it difficult to like this beautiful and vacant young man, but now he found it easy enough to respect him. Jerningham might have a mind as blank as a new slate, and the most atrociously affected accent in the country; he might be all narrow ambition and conceit; but he was an artist—not merely an artiste, but an artist. And how he

worked! It was his ambition to be the most graceful lounger, the best of all the idle fops of revue and musical comedy, and to achieve these butterfly perfections he trained like an athlete and toiled like a slave. Off the stage, Inigo had discovered that Jerningham could be easily ignored; but now at rehearsal he saw another young man, who knew exactly what he wanted, not merely from himself but from everybody else, and had made up his mind not to be baulked; he was in his own atmosphere, and at once flashed into life, like a fish put back into water. Inigo played with unusual zest to the very end. Jerningham leaned against the piano, smiled across it and then carefully wiped his forehead with a lilac silk handkerchief.

"By George!—but you can dance, though," cried Inigo enthusiastically. "Hope my playing was all right? This syncopated stuff's rotten to read at sight."

"Jally faine," said Jerningham. "Ai laike your playing. Jest what Ai warnted. You've got the Jaizz tech. You'll make a lat of difference to our baind too." He mopped himself delicately again. "Gled you laike my darncing. Ai'm pretty good at those steps, but Ai warnt some new ones very bardly."

Inigo flourished a manuscript. "You listen to this," he cried. "It's a song Jimmy and I wrote yesterday. The tune's one I've had in my head for some time, and now Jimmy's put some words to it."

"What's the taitle?"

"Slippin' round the Corner," Inigo told him. I'll play it to you while you're resting." And once again the mischievous little tune came dancing out of the keys. Long before Inigo had finished, Jerningham was looking over his shoulder at the manuscript and humming and tapping his feet.

"Oh, but it's a wanderful little namber!" cried Jerningham, with unexpected enthusiasm. "There's nathing going to tech it, nathing, Jallifarnt. And it's mai namber, isn't it? Must be mai namber, Ai insist."

"Yes, you can sing it," Inigo replied, with grim satisfaction. He was thinking of Susie.

Jerningham was going through the words now. "Ai must tray this now, Ai ralely must. You know you look like being a gold-maine,

Jallifarnt. Now do pramise you'll let me sing this for at least two or three months before you send it anywhere?"

"Oh, that's all right. I wasn't thinking of sending it anywhere."

"But mai dear boy, of course you must. There's pats of meney in things like this, pats. Shahly you knew thart!" And Jerningham opened wide his velvety brown eyes to stare at this strange fellow. "But let's tray it now. Here's Jaymy and Mitcham. We're just going to tray this namber of yours, Jaymy."

Jerningham took the manuscript—Inigo knowing the music by heart—and went through one verse and chorus rather slowly. Then he tried the second verse and took the chorus at quicker pace, his feet making little movements to the lilt of it. "Now we'll tray it all over again, please, Jallifarnt, and we'll put the snep into it. Raight you are." And when he came to repeat the chorus, he was accompanied by Mr. Mitcham's banjo and Jimmy on the drums. The four of them sent everything slipping gloriously round the corner, and Inigo danced on the piano stool, improvised the most astounding variations and flourishes, and laughed in his excitement. "Repeat, repeat," cried Jerningham, and immediately stopped singing and began dancing properly, while the other three, their heads wagging away, slipped and slipped and slipped round the corner.

"But where, where, where did you get that duck, that perfect little fat duck of a number?" It was Susie who came rushing on the stage. They had not noticed she was about. They had not noticed anything. "Never mind," she cried. "Tell me afterwards. Let's have it again, do let's have it again. I want to try it with Jerry."

So off they went again, repeating the chorus, with Susie, very excitedly humming and putting in all manner of strange words, dancing away with Jerningham. After a minute or two, the men stopped.

"Go on, go on, boys," she cried. "You're not going to stop, are you? Can't I have it again?"

No, she couldn't, they told her. They were all blown.

"Well, now you can tell me," said Susie. "Whose is it and where did it come from? Tell me all about it."

"It's mai new namber, Susie," Jerningham panted.

"And there's the boy who wrote it," said Mr. Mitcham, pointing to

Inigo. "And as soon as he let me hear it, I said 'That's a winner, my boy.' I can tell 'em. Went back to my hotel once in Chicago and there was a waiter there—little Jew boy—heard him picking out a tune on the piano, very quietly—nobody about, you see. I went straight up to him——"

But he had to finish his anecdote in the wings, where Jimmy and Jerningham were taking deep breaths. Susie had not stayed to listen to it. She had rushed over to Inigo at the piano.

"Do you mean to say you wrote that?" she demanded.

He smiled at her. "Well, Jimmy wrote the words, but I wrote the tune. It's—er—one of those little things of mine I believe I mentioned to you the other day. A poor thing but mine own; absolutely."

Susie stared at him, breathing hard. "And you've let Jerry Jerningham have it?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Well, you are a mean pig to give it to him like that, and not even let me hear it first. I didn't think you could be so—so—unfriendly, so spiteful."

"But you said——"

"I know what I said. But of course I didn't *mean* it. You ought to have known I didn't mean it. Besides, I thought if you did write anything, it would be dreadful—they usually are—and not something really good like that. And just because——" She paused.

"Because what?" He had stopped smiling now. He was busy trying to make head or tail of these remonstrances that came flashing out without any kind of logical sequence that he could discover, and at the same time he was telling himself how pretty she was. No, it wasn't just prettiness. Nor could you call it beauty. But there it was, infinitely delightful and disturbing.

Now she suddenly dropped her indignation. "It doesn't matter, of course. It's nothing. But I thought we were going to be friends, and it's obvious we're not. That's all. I suppose you're writing another now for Elsie Longstaff. No, I'm really cross now. I wasn't before, and you ought to have seen I wasn't. And I'm not cross now. Yes, I know. I thought I was but I wasn't. I'm just—well, I'm disappointed. That's all." She lowered her eyes as her voice trailed away. There was a

moment's silence. Then she tried to look brisk and cheerful. (And Inigo, bewildered but not yet entirely unobservant, did not know which it was.) "It really is a good little number," she said, with all the brittle brightness of a conscientious hostess. "And I must say, you're very clever. You'll make quite a lot of money if you keep on turning out things like that." And she strolled away, her head in the air.

This was Inigo's triumph, but he did not enjoy it. He sat there feeling rather ashamed of himself, though somewhere at the back of his mind was a cool little fellow who whispered that he had no reason to be ashamed of himself, that he had just been humbugged out of his triumph. Then she came back, ran across the stage, her face alight.

"I don't want you to think I'm bad-tempered, because I'm not, really I'm not," she cried, putting her elbows on the piano and resting her chin in her hands. In this position she could look at him steadily, and she did look at him steadily. "Now, aren't you sorry you gave that number to Jerry Jerningham instead of me? I know I haven't shown you yet what I can do, and I know that Jerry's very clever in his own way. I believe you were very disappointed in me the other day, weren't you?" she enquired, rather plaintively.

"Well, I don't know——" Inigo stammered, feeling it impossible to look away and equally impossible to say what he had thought with his eyes still fixed on hers.

"Are you really a spiteful person? You don't look like one. I thought at first you were rather nice."

"I am," he replied, trying to be the good-humoured, rather whimsical middle-aged gentleman, and not succeeding at all. "I'm usually considered specially nice. 'Here comes that nice Mr. Jollifant,' they say." He put on the indulgent smile of forty-five, but felt it wobble.

"Are you? I wonder." She stared at him with a kind of innocent speculation for a moment. "But you mustn't try to patronise me just because you're about three years older than I am, you know. We're just the same age really."

This was his chance. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "And now you're going to tell me that a girl is always years older than a man. I know. You've been reading magazine stories and light fiction from Boots'."

"I wasn't going to say anything of the kind," she protested, almost too

swiftly. "I was going to say I'd seen a lot more of life than you have. Then I thought I wouldn't. 'It might hurt his nice little conceit of himself,' I said to myself. So I didn't. If you want to be friends with a man, you mustn't ever say anything to hurt his precious vanity, and as that's always as big as a row of houses and tender all over, you have to be awfully careful."

"Oh, do you want to be friends, then?"

"Perhaps." She stood up now, gave a twirl or two. "I haven't made up my mind—quite."

"Do make up your mind. I'm all for it, absolutely," he said, turning into an eager youth again. "What's the good of being a Good Companion, if you're not friends."

"Mr. Oakroyd's my new friend," she remarked, still twirling. "Ahr Jess. Did you know his name's Jess? It's Jesiah, really. Isn't that too sweet? He comes to me and asks all about curtains and footlights and spot-lights and props, and he goes about looking so important when he's anything to do. He's already mended my basket for me. He says 'It'll do champion nar, Soos.' He calls me 'Soos,' and tells me all about Shuddersford and the Gurt North Roo-ad. We're very thick, I can tell you. I heard him saying to Miss Trant, 'Her and ahr Lily's as like as two peeas.' What d'you think of that?" She hummed a bar or two of *Slippin' round the Corner,* and tried a few steps. Then she smiled at Inigo.

"Do you know what you're going to do now, Mr. Inigo Jollifant?" she cried softly. "You're going to write another song, just as good as that, if not a wee bit better, and that number will be all for me. I can see it coming. And—listen—I'll promise to put all I know into it, and then one day a big manager from the West End will hear me singing it, and he'll send for you and he'll send for me, and we'll both make our fortunes. You'll have Francis, Day, and Hunter sitting on your doorstep, and I'll have fifteen agents fighting on the stairs. Now don't say you can't do it, because I know you can, you're so clever. Do you know, I said at once when I saw you, 'That boy with the lock of hair and the ridiculous knapsack doesn't look like a pro, but he looks a *clever* boy.' That's exactly what I said. And now, isn't that what you're going to do?"

And, strangely enough, Inigo admitted that it was. He even went so far as to add that already he had a tune in his head that might do, if Jimmy could dig up some words. "And are we friends again now?" he enquired.

"But of course we are," she replied. "Though we don't know each other very well, do we? But we're going to work very hard together." Then she looked him over rather severely. "But, you know, you mustn't take these little things so seriously. Mind that."

Before he could reply, she was giving a lightning imitation of a pompous gentleman fingering a large, pointed, and very important moustache. "Little things, you know, Mistah—ar—Jollifant," she croaked. "Me-ah differences of o-pin-yon, what! The kaind of thing that may happen at any mo-oh-ment—what!" Then she instantly became herself again, blew him a kiss, and tripped away.

Inigo stared after her and drew a very deep breath. Having had such innocents as Felton and Daisy Callander of Washbury Manor to deal with, he had come to see himself inevitably taking the lead, leaping from position to position and beckoning to the duller-witted who lumbered after him; but he could not help feeling that he had now more than met his match. Susie left him gasping. Being friends with her was going to be very exciting. It appeared that his imagination had probably not deceived him when, hearing her voice in the tea-room, it had seen a curtain go shooting up. That curtain was still going up, higher and higher.

Chapter Three

IN WHICH COLONEL TRANT'S DAUGHTER GOES INTO ACTION, STICKS TO HER GUNS, AND MAY BE CONSIDERED VICTORIOUS

I

HAVING taken the plunge, Miss Trant found herself at once in another world. It was, so far, chiefly a world of tea and chops and telegrams. The tea and chops came from her Rawsley landlady, who was very interested, very sympathetic, but unpunctual with meals. It was her habit to offer Miss Trant odd cups of tea the moment she saw her coming in, whatever the hour; and the meals, when they did arrive, seemed to be always a chop—a "nice chop," which apparently meant one that was burnt on the outside and quite raw in the interior. "Sit you down and 'ave a cup o' tea, Miss Trant, and I'll do you a nice chop," this was the good lady's formula. Fortunately, Miss Trant was hardly ever hungry that first week. Perhaps it was the telegrams that took away her appetite. Although the Trants had for generations made a trade, as it were, out of alarms and excursions, a telegram had still been something of an event at Hitherton, and even at the Old Hall the sight of a little brown envelope called up visions of catastrophe. But now the little brown envelopes fell in showers. The telegram was apparently the common method of communication in this extraordinary world, where everybody seemed to be "wiring" everybody else. Prompted by Jimmy Nunn, armed with the current number of *The Stage,* she "wired" the proprietors of Winter Gardens, Alfresco Pavilions, Kursaals, Châlets, and Playhouses, mostly in places she had never heard of before, and even such people as printers and costumers had to be "wired" too; and all these wires promptly produced other wires, some of them so compressed that they might as well have been in cipher, and others of a staggering length and fluency, like strange heads coming

round the door and screaming at the top of their voices at her. Of all the others, only Mr. Oakroyd, who frequently trotted round to the Post Office for her, shared her amazement at all this wiring. "Eh!—we're keeping all t'telegraph lads i't'country on t'run," he would cry. "It's war ner workin' for a bookie." The waste of money appalled him, but he could not help being delighted by the dash and importance of it all. At the Post Office he soon became a familiar figure. "If I bring yer onny more," he would tell them, "happen you'll be declaring a divvy this year"; and the three young women behind the counter would nod and say, brightly, if vaguely: "That's right"; and they were all very friendly.

Living in such a whirl of telegraphy, Miss Trant felt she had no right to sit down and enjoy a meal at her leisure. She did sit down—though she always felt she ought to be standing up—but she ate her chops as hastily and perfunctorily as her landlady had cooked them. The latter, we may say, proffered a brief sketch of a dinner, and Miss Trant, in her turn, replied with a brief sketch of a diner. It was only late in the evening, when there were no more "dates" to be considered and no more problems to be instantly solved, that she achieved any real sustenance. This she did by drinking a large cup of cocoa (a weakness of hers) and munching her way through innumerable buttered Digestive biscuits while staring at a book. The book was *Barlasch of the Guard*, borrowed on payment of twopence and a deposit of half-a-crown from the little stationer's in the market-place, and very slow the story seemed too, after all the telegrams. She was beginning to read these things with the air of an old soldier listening to a fellow veteran only a year or two older than himself.

The problems she had to solve were numerous and for the most part fantastic. One of the most reasonable was that of costumes. Like many other concert parties, the late Dinky Doos had made a practice of giving the first part of their entertainment in fancy pierrot costume and the second half in evening dress. The Good Companions had decided to continue this practice, though two members of the party had protested against it. Mr. Jerningham had objected because he delighted in himself in evening dress, which he would have worn in the morning if he could have done so. Mr. Joe Brundit objected because he always had

trouble with his dress collars—"They fairly saw my head off some nights," he grumbled—and was very gloomy about laundries. These gentlemen were allowed to argue with one another, but otherwise no notice was taken of them. Miss Trant discovered, however, that she disliked the pierrot costumes worn by the three women. They were cheap, faded, cottony things, and must be replaced at once. There popped up in Miss Trant, who had always dressed herself very quietly, partly because she had been timid and partly because she really thought a quiet style suited her, a long-hidden lover of the gaudy and fantastic in clothes, and this dashing creature hurried off in the car to the nearest large town and showed her shimmering cascades of silk, plunged her into orgies of apple-green and scarlet and lilac and jade, called down a rain of multi-coloured frills and tassels and pompoms. And she found two allies. Mrs. Joe was useless, simply a born knitter and nothing more. Nor was Susie much better, for though her taste was reasonably good (Mrs. Joe's was vile), she was much too impatient and not at all clever with her fingers, as she readily admitted herself. This was a disappointment to Miss Trant, with whom Susie was already a favourite. It was the fluffy Elsie, the one she liked least so far, who proved herself to be a treasure in this matter of costumes. Elsie had a passion for clothes; she had good taste; she could design, cut out and sew like a professional tailor and needlewoman. She also had—as Susie said—a nose for clever, cheap dressmakers, and it was she who brought in the second ally, Miss Thong. There can be no doubt that Miss Thong really was a clever, cheap dressmaker and that she worked miracles for them those few days, but that is not the reason why she deserves a little space to herself. We must glance at Miss Thong because the image of her haunted Miss Trant at odd moments throughout that winter. Miss Thong has a part in the homely epic; it is a very tiny part—no more than that of a whispering ghost—but we cannot say it has no significance. Miss Trant remembers her to this very day.

She went with Elsie, who knew the way. They walked the length of an unusually monotonous street of little brick houses, which ended in some waste ground, a melancholy muddle of worn turf, clayey holes, wire-netting and ramshackle fowl-houses made out of orange boxes, and a few dirty and listless hens. The last house on the left was de-

tached from the row, but was yet so close to it, so obviously still a part of it, that Miss Trant felt that this house had just been sawn off, as if it were the crust of a long loaf. It looked like a slice too, for it was severely rectangular and only one room in breadth, being indeed the very narrowest house she had ever seen. It was not old; it was not dingy; it was newish, had a bright glazed look, and was immediately depressing. There were two little brass plates on the door: one said *Midland Guardian and Widows Fire and Life Assurance* and the other whispered *Miss Thong—Dressmaker*. The door was opened to them by the Midland Guardian, who had watery eyes, a drooping grey moustache, carpet slippers, and a coat and waistcoat that had seen far too much gravy and egg. Yes, yes, his daughter was in, and they could see her; but she was busy; she was always busy these days, always in great demand; and she wasn't too strong, not really strong enough for all the work that came. One of these days, he told them as they went into the tiny sitting-room, he would have to put his foot down, the girl was doing too much. And he shuffled out, to tell her they were there. "I know the sort of foot he'll put down," Elsie whispered. "I'll bet she keeps him going all right. If he makes enough out of his insurance to keep him in whisky, I'd be surprised. Silly old blighter! But she isn't strong, either. She's a queer little thing."

She was a queer little thing: no older than Miss Trant herself, perhaps, but very small and crooked, with thin hair pathetically bobbed, hollow cheeks, and a long nose that seemed to flush in a most unhappy manner. Her eyes were bright enough but she had hardly any eyelashes and the lids were slightly reddened. Perhaps she was consumptive. She looked as if she might have anything and everything wrong with that frail body of hers. It seemed as if one winter's night would extinguish her for ever. Nevertheless, as soon as she saw Elsie, her face lit up and she plunged at once into a gasping prattle that never stopped all the way up to the front room upstairs that was her workroom. When she learned that the troupe was to be re-formed under the direction of Miss Trant, she was genuinely delighted, almost in an ecstasy. She insisted upon telling Miss Trant all about the two performances of the Dinky Doos she had seen when they had been giving the show the first week.

"It was such a treat to me, you can't imagine," she gasped. "And then when Miss Longstaff came here—and I'd seen her only two nights before, singing and dancing there and looking prettier than a picture —well, well, it was a surprise! I stared at her, couldn't believe my own eyes! I must have looked a sketch." Here Miss Thong laughed heartily at herself. "Didn't you think I did, Miss Longstaff? Never mind, so did you, when you came on as that little girl in the choir. That was a skit, that was. Laugh!—you ought to have heard me. And that Mr. Nunn—he's a comic, if you like. The way he went on telling everybody they was late! And then betting five pounds with that other one—who was it?—that fine sing-ger—yes, that's him—Mr. Brundit—oh, that was good! And that Miss Susie Dean! Isn't she a card? The way she took people off! Really enjoying herself, she was, you could tell just by looking at her. So pretty too! And what high spirits! Now don't you go and be jealous, Miss Longstaff, because I'll say the same for you. I'm not going to quarrel with the prettiest customer I've got, and a real famous actress too—no, no, no!" And Miss Thong cocked her head on one side, looked very arch and very cunning at one and the same time, and then laughed at herself so heartily that she burst into a fit of coughing and hastily put a handkerchief to her mouth.

Miss Trant stared out of the window a minute, then said: "I'm glad you enjoyed the show so much, Miss Thong. At least, I imagine you did," she added, with a smile.

"I haven't enjoyed anything so much, I don't know when," cried Miss Thong. "I went twice—did I tell you? It's not usual for me to go even once, but twice—then it's got to be extra special. I said to Pa—he doesn't like me going out much, you know—but I said to him 'I know I'm very busy,' I said, 'and I know it costs money. But I must go again,' I said, 'because they're so good they've taken me right out of myself, what with their sing-ging and lovely dancing and their comics and all,' I said. And when I heard they'd gone and broken up—oh, the news soon gets round in Rawsley!—well, I could have sat down and cried. And then Miss Longstaff told me how they'd been treated, Miss What's it—Miss Trant, I beg your pardon. 'What a shame!' I said. There I'd been sitting here, thinking how lovely they looked and trying to hum some of the songs and telling myself they hadn't

a care in the world, and there they were all feeling as miserable as anything, not knowing where to look, you might say, and me here with my nice little business. And that only made me feel more miserable. You know how you can get sometimes?" And Miss Thong laughed again. "But to think that you're beginning all over again!"

"And going to be better," said Elsie. "We've got two good new men."

"Just fancy!" cried Miss Thong delightedly. "It just shows you, doesn't it? You never know what's waiting round the corner, as I tell Pa. He'll never believe in anything. Oh, these business men, I say! He never would believe we'd get this house. But here we are. And isn't it nice here, Miss Trant?" She almost pushed them both over to the window with her. They looked out at the bald turf, the half bricks and tin cans, the huddle of box lids and wire netting and hens.

"Very nice," said Miss Trant. Then, with an effort: "Very nice indeed."

"Isn't it?" cried Miss Thong. "It's so open. You're in the town and yet *not* in it, I say. Especially up here, looking right out. That's where all the boys down the street play—cricket and football—and though they're a bit noisy, I don't mind it—quite cheers you up to see them running about and hear them shouting. It's a bit of life, isn't it? I'm glad you think it's nice here. It's made such a difference to me having such a lookout. What with this house and the dressmaking doing so well, they'll be telling me soon I'm getting above myself. Perhaps I am, what with actresses coming too, eh, Miss Longstaff? Somebody said to me, the other day, when I told them, they said 'You'll be going on the stage yourself next, Miss Thong.' 'And a fine sketch I'd look!' I said." Here Miss Thong laughed and coughed again, and Elsie laughed a little too, and Miss Trant tried to laugh, but found it easier to turn away and undo the parcels they had brought with them.

They told her what they wanted, and she frowned and gasped out questions and nodded excitedly and busied herself clearing the work-table. "There, you can go away," she cried to the vanishing pieces of material, "and so can you, and you, and you. Coat and skirt—blue serge and braid—for Mrs. Moxon—that's the last of you for a bit and I don't care if you *are* promised. Semi-evening for Miss Abbey—wants

it for whist-drives—and *you'll* have to wait. Yes, I'll do it for you, Miss Trant, Miss Longstaff, but don't—oh, don't—breathe a word to any one in Rawsley I'm doing it, or my custom's gone! You see, I've promised and promised and better promised—and they come round and ask and ask—just as if a girl had twelve pairs of hands. But I'll do it for you. I don't care. They can all wait, that's what I say." The little crooked creature grasped the edge of her table, stood as erect as she could, and, with cheeks paler than ever but with her great nose flushing triumphantly, she seemed to defy a host of clamouring Moxons and Abbeys, coats and skirts and semi-evenings. "So there you are," she cried. "If I've to lock myself in this room, give out I'm ill again, I'll do it. Let's have a bit of life, I say. Now tell me what you want and show me what you've got."

"We want a harlequin effect in some of the dresses," said Elsie. "We've got all sorts of remnants and lovely odd bits. Look here. Sateens and light silks and crêpe-de-Chine and velvet." And the next minute, the worktable had disappeared, and in its place was a crazy garden of fabrics, a rainbow carnival.

"Oh, I say! O-o-oh!" After this first rapturous cry, Miss Thong breathed hard, quivered with delight, pressed her hands together, and stared and stared, as if her eyes had long been thirsty and could at last drink their fill. Then she fell upon the glowing heap. "Oh, look at this—and this—and these two together," she babbled ecstatically. "Here's some apricot velvet—lovely cap it would make, wouldn't it? And that old rose—let me smooth it out—look!—put that with it—wait till I get some pins—hundreds of pins—oh, aren't I silly?"

"I was like that the other day," said Miss Trant, laughing.

"I'm always like that," said Elsie, who was indeed nearly as excited as Miss Thong. "They go to my head, I can tell you. Look at that, Miss Thong. Isn't it lovely?"

"Isn't it! Oh, deary dear! It's all lovely, and I don't know where to start or whether I'm on my head or my heels or laughing or crying, I don't really. Now aren't I silly?" And it certainly looked as if something dreadful would happen to Miss Thong, who was trying to laugh and cough and blow her nose and pick up some of the silks and fill her mouth with pins all at the same time. At last, however, she quietened

down, the professional dressmaker taking the place of the enraptured woman, and they discussed the dresses they wanted. It was arranged that Elsie should help her when she was not wanted for rehearsal, during the remaining two days at Rawsley.

It was Wednesday evening when Miss Trant called there again. The thin little house, now beseiged by the curiously melancholy dusk of autumn, that smoky blue into which the green and gold of summer has vanished, it seems, for ever, looked forlorn enough, but its glazed brightness had gone and there was something cheerful and brave, a hint of the indomitable, about that lighted upstairs window. Elsie was there, looking very pink and rounded and robust by the side of Miss Thong, who in the searching gaslight seemed frailer and uglier than before, like a worn-out witch, with that great nose and her dimmed eyes peering between their reddened lids. She was obviously tired out, yet greeted Miss Trant triumphantly. Two dresses were completed.

"And Miss Longstaff's is one of them," she began.

"Elsie, I told you," said that young lady.

"There now!" she cried to Miss Trant, nodding her head. "She wants me to call her Elsie. Aren't I getting on? And it seems only a minute since I saw her on the stage. Well then, Elsie's is finished and it's the loveliest thing you ever saw, Miss Trant, it really is. Do put it on, Elsie. Slip into my bed-room and put it on. Just to please me."

After an interrogative glance at Miss Trant, Elsie nodded, went out, and returned in an incredibly short space of time an entirely different person. In that soft shimmer of blues and greens she looked almost beautiful.

"But what a lovely dress you've made!" cried Miss Trant with genuine enthusiasm. "It's like a wood full of bluebells." She turned to Miss Thong to congratulate her.

But Miss Thong's gaze was still fastened mistily upon Elsie. Her lips were quivering a little, and her long clever hands were clutching and twisting. "Oh—Miss—Miss—Elsie," she faltered, moving a step or so towards her. "You do look beautiful in it. And I made it, didn't I? And to think of you—wearing it—sing-ging and dancing in it—going all over —thousands of people. Oh, I am silly—but—just to think ——"

Elsie put an arm about her, held her for a moment, then stooped and

lightly kissed her on the cheek. "You're not silly, you're very clever," she said softly. "There. Isn't she clever, Miss Trant? We shall have to put her name on the programmes, won't we? Dresses by Madame Thong of Rawsley."

"Oh, go on with you," gasped Miss Thong, dabbing at her eyes and laughing and crying. "I really must be tired. I don't know when I've taken on so. You must be thinking 'She's a ridiculous little thing.' Now aren't you? Never mind, we're all a bit silly sometimes. Best thing I can do is to put in a bit at Mrs. Moxon's coat and skirt, that'll bring me to my senses. Two yards of braid to put on, plenty of machining, that's what I want. There now, let's talk about the other things."

So they settled down to talk about the other dresses and were very business-like. It was when Miss Thong began to discuss sending them on and to ask about addresses that Miss Trant, who was moved by the thought of their leaving this little woman and never seeing her again, had an inspiration.

"Tomorrow morning, you know," she began, "we leave for a place called Dotworth——"

"That's the three-night stand I told you about," Elsie put in, nodding at Miss Thong.

"And then next week we go to a seaside place on the East Coast called Sandybay," Miss Trant continued. "Now if all the dresses will be finished by about next Monday or Tuesday, why don't you bring them yourself—you needn't carry them, you know; we can arrange about that—and then you can try them on."

"And I could see you all on the stage too, couldn't I?" cried Miss Thong eagerly, her face lighting up.

"Of course you could. And it would be a nice little holiday for you too, after all your hard work. You could stay a day or two."

"Oh, wouldn't that be lovely! Going to the seaside and trying on the dresses and seeing them on the stage perhaps and hearing it all again and better than last time and—oh—everything!" For a moment she saw it all, fastened on it in pure rapture. Then the light died out of her face. "But I couldn't do it, Miss Trant. Oh, I wish I could, but I really couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Oh!—so many things. There's—I don't know—I couldn't begin to think of it."

"Of course we should pay your expenses," said Miss Trant casually. "Naturally, when you're working for us. It's the usual thing, isn't it, Elsie?"

"Done every time," replied Elsie promptly and with a grateful glance at Miss Trant. Then she looked severely at Miss Thong. "Now you're being really silly. I don't believe you want to see me in my dress. You come along. I'll get you in my digs."

"Yes, of course, Elsie, Miss Trant, I know—but—oh, don't ask me! There's Pa. He'd never let me go, I know he wouldn't."

"Where is he? Is he in now? Downstairs? All right, you leave him to me," said Elsie grimly. "If it's only Pa that's bothering you, I'll soon settle Pa."

And off she went, there and then, leaving Miss Thong—as she admitted—"downright flabbergasted." It took Elsie exactly five minutes to settle Pa, and there could be no doubt—as a glance at her face promptly informed them—that on this question the Midland Guardian was settled once and for all.

"And didn't he mind then?" cried Miss Thong in wonder and delight.

"Not a bit," said Elsie, still grimly. "He liked it. And he'll keep on liking it."

"Well, I'll come then. Yes, I will. I'll work and work and get them all finished and I'll bring them. I know there's an excursion from here to Sandybay—four days or something—and that'll make it cheaper. I don't know how I'll get all the dresses to the station."

"I do," said Elsie. "Pa will take them."

"And I shall be able to come in and see you all for nothing, won't I?" cried Miss Thong. "And perhaps go behind the scenes."

"Of course! Madame Thong, dressmaker to *The Good Companions,*" said Elsie. "Can't we put it in the programmes, Miss Trant?"

"We can and we will," she replied, rising. "We must finish making the arrangements now. I've still got heaps and heaps of things to do. I wondered at first how I should find anything to do, but now I seem to be busy from the crack of dawn."

"I'm sure you like it, don't you, Miss Trant?" said Miss Thong. "It's

a bit of life, isn't it? That's what I feel about doing these dresses. Give me a bit of life, I say."

And that was one of the things Miss Trant did not forget.

II

It was very exciting being at last on the move. She took with her in the car Jimmy Nunn and Mr. Oakroyd, setting off very early so that these two would have an opportunity of putting the stage in order, for the hall they were using at Dotworth, known as the Olympic, was a picture theatre. The others came on later, by train. On the way, she tried to be very cool about it all, told herself that it was, of course, a most absurd frolic, but nevertheless she was very excited. And that night she would see the party—*her* party—how ridiculous that sounded!—on the stage, acting before an audience, for the first time. Just before they arrived there she had to make a confession.

"You know, I feel thrilled already," she told Jimmy.

He was rather troubled about this. "Not that I don't understand; I do," he said. "I don't care if a man's been fifty years in the business, there's the same old thrill comes back. Opening night—all of a doodah! I know. I've had some opening nights in my time. It's that as much as anything that ruins a man's digestion."

"Isn't yours any better?"

"Better! Worse and worse! Believe me, I've nearly forgotten the motions of eating. A knife and fork worries me. I ate so little at Rawsley that even the landlady complained, said it was putting her off her own feed, and her husband came to see me one night and got quite nasty about it, said their food was as good as anybody else's, and he was tired of eating my meals cold or warmed-up and being called a glutton by his missis into the bargain. But what I wanted to say is this. Don't expect anything here, Miss Trant."

"What haven't I to expect?"

"Anything at all," he replied promptly. "The show's not in shape yet. This Dotworth isn't a real date. I know the place; played it once before, years ago. It's a dud. All we're doing, Miss Trant, is trying it on the dog."

And Dotworth looked rather like a dog: "One of those forlorn yellow

little mongrels," Miss Trant told herself. In the faint sunlight the little town looked yellowish, and there was something forlorn about the streets through which they were passing.

The Olympic was a very small place, sandwiched between an ironmonger's and a draper's. On a board in front was pasted one of their new bills. There it was—*The Good Companions*—in bold lettering. The sight of it gave Miss Trant a sense of achievement that was very pleasant.

"But look at that," groaned Jimmy, pointing, "just look at it, I ask you."

Undoubtedly the bill was not very impressive. It suffered because underneath it was a highly coloured poster of a film. This poster showed several pairs of legs, apparently supporting *The Good Companions'* bill, and underneath these legs were letters of flame that said: *A Drama from the very Depths of the Soul.*

"That's what they do to you in these one-eyed holes," said Jimmy. "You'll have to cover that poster up, Oakroyd."

Miss Trant had never heard of a "one-eyed hole" before, but the term kept popping up in her mind during the afternoon and early evening, when she was busy running round Dotworth, going from the station to the Olympic, from the Olympic to her hotel. Dotworth certainly was a one-eyed hole, and by the time the doors of the Olympic were opened, she was convinced that that solitary eye would not be fixed upon *The Good Companions.* It was not the first time she had been anxious about the size of an audience, for she had helped at charity concerts and the like at Hitherton, but she had never felt so anxious before. When she saw the doors open and people walking past them, she positively winced. But if the people went in, she was not happy about them but was busy wondering if they would enjoy it. Before the curtain went up, she was able to count the audience. There were ninety-three altogether; twelve in the one-and-tenpenny seats; thirty-seven in the one-and-twopenny seats (but these included ten free passes for people exhibiting bills): and the remaining forty-four were ninepennies at the back. She tried to do a little mental arithmetic but was not successful, so she called it three pounds and reminded herself that these next three performances could only be considered dress rehearsals.

"I'm not gone on these 'ere pierrots," she heard somebody say. "Give me pitchers." Then, a minute later, the same voice went on: "That is so. Just what I've said many a time, many and many a time." The woman cleared her throat mournfully. "Give me pitchers."

Miss Trant felt like giving her a box on the ears. Pictures indeed! Still tingling, she sat down at the very end of one of the one-and-tenpenny rows, having agreed that for this first night she must keep in front. The great moment arrived. No footlights suddenly and beautifully illuminated the curtain, for there were no footlights. The stage was lighted from above, and now these lights were switched on and those in the body of the hall turned off. There came the thrilling sound of a gong, then the crash of a chord or two, followed by a run, on the piano. The curtain rose about a foot, hesitated, wobbled, then rose another six inches, then stopped—to reveal several agitated pairs of legs. There was some agonised whispering. Then a voice spoke out from the wings in desperation. "Nay," it said, "shoo won't budge an inch."

There was some clapping and jeering at the back.

"Sh-sh," cried Miss Trant fiercely, turning round.

The curtain began wobbling again; jerked up another few inches; stopped again; then suddenly ran up at full speed, presenting the audience with a splendid view of Jimmy Nunn's back. But that gentleman was equal to the occasion. He did not run off but coolly turned round, made a face at the audience, and said: "Oh, you're here, are you? Couldn't make out where you'd got to. I'll call the others. They'd like to see you." And he put two fingers to his mouth and whistled, gave Inigo at the piano a nod, sat himself down behind the drums, and they crashed into the opening chorus. It was superbly done. Miss Trant felt as if she had just tobogganed over a chasm. She had not been so excited about anything for years.

It was very odd and amusing seeing her new friends on the stage. She had never known any professionals before, and it was quite different from watching amateurs. When you saw people you knew acting with amateur dramatic societies, they were merely themselves with parts stuck on to them: Mrs. Corvison pretended to be a maid, and Major Thompson wore a wig and butler's clothes—and that was all. But with these professionals, you lost all sight of the private personalities; they simply

came to life on the stage in another sort of way; and as you watched them, you could hardly believe that you really knew them as people. Jimmy Nunn, for example, was all drollery; he had an entirely new voice, very queer and squeaky; and the man she knew who had been so worried about percentages and his digestion completely disappeared. Mr. Jerningham, whose dancing was so astonishing, became a vivid personality. Mr. Mitcham was immensely dignified and impressive, and when he was repeatedly contradicted and fooled by Jimmy and pretended to lose his temper, he seemed like an outraged ambassador. Elsie appeared to be ten years younger, and frivolity itself; though her stage personality appealed to Miss Trant rather less than her real one. Even the Brundits, whose singing interested Miss Trant less than any other part of the performance, simply because she had heard much better singing of this kind all her life, at least contrived to be imposing figures. Mrs. Joe swam down the stage like a Queen of Song, and acknowledged any applause that came her way with the air of a duchess opening a charity bazaar. And Joe, when he was busy "feeding" Jimmy, could say "Well, I'll bet you a fiver, old man," and produce a crumpled bit of newspaper, quite in the manner of a gentleman whose pockets are stuffed with fivers. As for Susie, who was best of all, she did not change; she was still her delightful self: but she seemed enlarged and intensified in this new atmosphere; she treated the stage as if it were her own hearth rug and the audience as if it were composed of old friends attending her birthday party. Everything she did was deliciously absurd. She sang ordinary sentimental little music-hall songs, and by letting her voice slide down and down, by catching her breath at awkward moments, by a droll flick of a glance, she turned them inside out and then tossed them away with an easy scorn. Her dancing itself was a delicate parody, a sly comment on Elsie and Jerry Jerningham. And then she contrived to give lightning sketches of all manner of people; just a phrase or two, a walk, a gesture, a grimace, and you were reminded at once of somebody solemn and ridiculous you had known; if she only had to cross the stage, she would do it in character or caricature, and you had to laugh; she was always being somebody and yet she was always Susie too, for you were always conscious of the girl herself, with her dark eyes and tilted nose, her rather square shoulders, her sturdy figure. Unlike Jimmy Nunn, she

did not seem to give you a set performance; her acting was a kind of witty romping, an overflow of high spirits; and it was all essentially feminine—"Aren't they *absurd,* my dear?" it seemed to say; and Miss Trant, who remembered so well the times she had felt like that, but could do nothing but bottle it up, adored her. The fact that Dotworth evidently thought the girl an amateurish trifler, who ought to learn to sing a luscious ballad or redden her nose and be really funny, only stiffened Miss Trant's allegiance and fed the flame of her enthusiasm. Oh, it had been worth it just for Susie! This girl *had* to go on and on, that was certain.

When the final curtain came, the applause was only half-hearted. Miss Trant stood up and clapped fiercely. There was the company, *her* company and her friends, who had worked so hard all the evening and the whole week before this evening; there they were, smiling—for the curtain had risen again just to let them smile—and these poor Dotworth creatures could only stare or go poking about for their hats. It was not fair. Miss Trant clapped harder than ever, and then, when the lights came on, there was some staring in her direction, but she did not care. At least, one Miss Trant did not care, even if the other did—for now there seemed to be two of her.

There was the Miss Trant who had been growing up so quickly ever since she left Hitherton. It was this Miss Trant who had so suddenly, so recklessly, so absurdly decided to run the Concert Party, who had plunged into this shabby and adventurous world of minor theatres and had so far enjoyed every moment it had offered her, who had become passionately concerned with dates and rentals and seating and production numbers and costumes, who had already plucked out of this dingy wilderness of lodgings, makeshift theatres, and dull little towns, the fine flowers of work and comradeship and loyalty. But there still remained the Miss Trant who had lived so long at the Old Hall, Hitherton, the woman who had arrived in her middle thirties in a very different world, into which none of her new companions, except perhaps Inigo Jollifant, could ever have found their way; a world full of people who would see very little difference between travelling round with a concert party and singing in the streets. It would be idle to pretend that this Miss Trant had been banished for ever almost at a moment's notice. She was there

in the background, wondering and sometimes wincing. She was ready to point out that this was all very well perhaps for a week or two's frolic, while they were moving obscurely in little towns, but that sooner or later the two worlds must clash and then there would probably be a catastrophe in one of them. She had her hour when there came a reply from Mr. Truby of Cheltenham, the solicitor, who had had to be told something of what was happening so that he could make arrangements with the bank about forwarding money. Mr. Truby had replied that he would do his best to carry out her instructions and did not anticipate any difficulty; he was as solemnly courteous as ever and showed no trace of surprise; yet there was that in his letter which announced in effect that Mr. Truby was ready to carry out the wishes of any clients no matter how monstrous they might be, until such time as he received a medical certificate proving their insanity. And that was only a beginning. Very soon there must come a real test—and what would happen then? Could this tiny fantastic army of pierrots withstand the massed forces of Hitherton? Those forces could act through the glance of amazement, the lifted eyebrows, the horrified remonstrances, of a single person; and Miss Trant was aware of the fact, though she had not the least idea who the person might be.

She had not long to wait for either the test or the person. They arrived together, on the Wednesday afternoon of the following week, at Sandybay.

III

Dotworth had been a failure: they had made neither friends nor money there, and they had all been glad to leave the place. They would really make a start, they told one another, at Sandybay, which some of them knew and proclaimed to be "not a bad date." Miss Trant had never heard of it before, but then she knew very little about the East Coast. It was certainly very pleasant after Rawsley and Dotworth, for it was a clean friendly little town, open to salt winds that as yet only had a healthy chill in them. In the mornings, when the October sun struggled through, there was a fine sparkle on the sea, the air was as crisp and sweet as an apple, and it was delightful to swing along the promenade. In the centre, the old part, Sandybay was still a fishing village, a fascinat-

ing higgledy-piggledy of boats, nets, capstans, blue jerseys, mahogany faces, and queer inns. On the outskirts, it was a residential town; it had a ring of little villas and two golf courses; and retired army officers and district commissioners abounded there, battling with weeds in the morning, trying a niblick in the afternoon, and bidding a quite unjustified Three No Trumps in the evening. In the spaces between these outskirts and the old fishing village, Sandybay was a growing but still "select" resort; and here you found the Beach Hotel, the Sandringham Boarding House, the Old Oak Café, the Elite Picture Theatre, Eastman's Circulating Library, the Municipal Bandstand and Floral Gardens, and the Pier. This Pier went forward about twenty-five yards, then swelled out in a rather dropsical fashion to support a Pavilion, which looked like an overgrown and neglected greenhouse. However, it boasted a stage equipped with footlights, a spot-light, and an excellent curtain, a grand piano and several dressing-rooms for artistes, and seating accommodation for six hundred people. After achieving this Pavilion, the Pier went on again for about a hundred yards and ended in a subdued riot of little kiosks and automatic machines, the whole dominated by the Refreshment Room, where the very red-faced men who took out monthly angling tickets could obtain a little Scotch or Draught Bass. It is perhaps worth remarking, in passing, that our friend Mr. Morton Mitcham had made the Refreshment Room his headquarters and had become a great favourite with both the staff (one blonde and one brunette) and the patrons, who included in their number two gentlemen who were nearly sure —after some prompting—that they had seen Mr. Mitcham before, one in Singapore in Nought Three, the other in Sydney in Nought Eight. Mr. Mitcham himself declared more than once that he remembered them both very well, and they were all very happy together.

It was the manager of the Pier who had engaged *The Good Companions* (on a sixty-per-cent basis, with a thirty-pound guarantee), for Sandybay was trying to extend its season until the end of October and had promised its visitors a "First-class Concert Party every week in the Pier Pavilion" throughout the month. The fact that *The Good Companions* had found it ridiculously easy to find lodgings (with sitting-rooms wildly thrown in) suggested there had not been any rush of belated holiday-makers during this second week of October. And so far,

that is, on Monday and Tuesday evenings, the attendances had been poor. Jimmy Nunn said there were plenty of people in the town, enough to give them a full house every night, but that they had no inclination to walk out to the Pier Pavilion. Miss Trant agreed with him. The town was bright enough in the morning, lit by the huge flickering gem of the sea, but by tea-time this brightness had faded, the waters were ghostly, the waves came lapping in melancholy, and the evening, twice accompanied by a drizzle of rain, was forlorn indeed, and there was nothing more forlorn in it than the echoing length of the Pier. A cosy theatre of the old-fashioned kind, all gilt and crimson plush, stuffy and glittering, would have been proof against such evenings, but this Pavilion, like nothing but a huge decayed conservatory, was helpless before the mournful mystery of the autumnal darkness and the moan of the sea. But there was time yet, they told one another; the end of the week was always better than the beginning.

Miss Trant had had an early lunch on this Wednesday so that she could see what was happening in the Pavilion, where Mr. Oakroyd, assisted by Joe (who was not a bad hand with a paint brush), was making a little "set" for a new production-number-cum-sketch devised by Jimmy Nunn. This "set" showed the exterior of a cottage and consisted of a practicable door and window and a few square feet of painted canvas at each side. Mr. Oakroyd and Joe had nearly finished and were now sitting in their shirt-sleeves triumphantly refreshing themselves with a bottle of beer and large sandwiches. Inigo and Jimmy Nunn were at the piano, trying over a new song. Miss Trant walked through the auditorium and then stopped in the centre gangway, near the end of the third row of front seats, to examine the "set," which was propped up, drying, at one side of the stage. She had just congratulated the two craftsmen, who were very proud of themselves, and was thinking what fun it was to be able to have things like that made, merely to have an excuse to return happily to the play of the nursery, when the Pavilion attendant, a man with one eye and a long melancholy face, came up to her and said: "There's a lady askin' for yer, Miss Trant."

"Who is it?" She was puzzled.

"I dunno, Miss," he replied, looking at her sadly with his single eye. "She wouldn't give no name."

"Well, ask her to come in here then, please," she said, and exchanged a few more remarks with the craftsmen on the stage. Then she looked round. Somebody had just entered the Pavilion, was approaching her. It was her sister Hilda, and the very last person she wished to see at that moment.

So far Hilda has only entered this chronicle in the conversation of her nephew Hilary, who reported that she was "frightfully down on" the idea that he should spend his time with *The Static*. For the last fifteen years she has been the wife of Lawrence Newent, of Porchison, Newent and Porchison, solicitors; the excellent mother of his two children and the equally excellent ruler of his household in Cadogan Place. She is not unlike our Miss Trant in appearance, but shorter and stouter and glossier; is actually six years older but looks ten. As a wife, a mother, a mistress of the house, she is a sensible and capable woman; it is only as a social being, a member of society, or rather two societies, for she is always leaving one and struggling into another, that she is somewhat ridiculous. In her time she has been the victim of many passing enthusiasms and cults, but it is obvious that though they might necessitate a re-valuation of the whole universe (there was Theosophy, for example) they never at their maddest urge came within a thousand miles of managing a pierrot troupe. But for the last twenty years, she has alternately condemned her sister Elizabeth for holding herself in too much and for wanting to break out. During the last years of their father's life she did not hesitate to say that Elizabeth had been foolish enough to allow herself to be submerged. At this moment—and it is written in her eyes as she approaches—she thinks the girl had emerged, broken out, with a vengeance.

They kissed. "But, Hilda"—and Miss Trant gave a short nervous laugh—"what a surprise!"

"Isn't it?" said Hilda, rather vaguely. She was busy looking about her. "They told me I should find you here." Her glance rested on Inigo's lock of hair, on Jimmy's puckered shining face above the piano, on Joe's shirt-sleeves, on Mr. Oakroyd's sandwich and bottle of beer. And when her eyes returned to meet her sister's, all these things had been quietly extinguished or at least removed a great distance.

"How did you find me?" Miss Trant asked quickly.

"Truby told me," Hilda replied. "He wrote. He seemed to think it was his duty to write, that we ought to know. And I agree."

"Well, I think it was rather impertinent of him," cried Miss Trant. "It was no duty of his at all. I'm sure that's not the way Lawrence treats his clients. Not that I really mind, of course."

"Naturally. Unless, of course, you didn't want us to know."

Miss Trant coloured. "That's absurd. I should have told you myself. I've had no opportunity yet, really. I've been so busy. Honestly, Hilda, I've never been so busy before. You've no idea what a lot there is to do."

Hilda closed her eyes, an old trick of hers, effective for once because it seemed to remove still further the shirt-sleeves and bottles of beer.

"But tell me," Miss Trant went on, "how you came to find me here."

"I wired to Truby and he told me where you were. Then I came down the moment I could. It was fearfully inconvenient putting everything off today—you know what it's like in town now, the awful rush —but I simply had to come. Lawrence wanted to come himself. At first, when he heard about it, he laughed—exercising his precious sense of humour, as usual—but he soon saw it wasn't particularly funny, and he wanted to come because he thought you'd probably been encouraged to sign some perfectly iniquitous contract or other and would lose all your money. He says this business is full of the most awful swindlers, and he knows all about these things. So he wanted to come himself and get you out of it, he said. But I told him I must see you myself first. There was quite a good train from Liverpool Street, and then of course it didn't take me long to guess they would know something about you here. So there you have it, Elizabeth."

"I see," said Miss Trant slowly. Then she suddenly smiled and lightly touched her sister on the arm. "Well, Hilda, I'm very pleased to see you."

There was a silence between them. From the piano there came a soft tum-tum-tumming. From the other side of the stage came the voice of Mr. Oakroyd, rather muffled with sandwich, saying very confidentially: "I'll tell tha what it is, Joe. Ale you get from t'wood's bad enuff naradays, but this 'ere bottled stuff's nowt but fizz, blaws you up like a balloon."

Hilda sent a glance of despair towards the stage, then moved away,

down the gangway. Miss Trant followed her, and together they walked to the entrance, where they stopped.

"Now, my dear," cried Miss Trant, "I can see you're nearly bursting. Do begin."

"And I can see you're ready to fly into a temper and talk all kinds of nonsense," replied Hilda good-humouredly. "And I refuse to have a quarrel in this absurd place, it would be too ridiculous." Then she looked grave. "But I must say something."

"Well, say it, Hilda, say it at once."

"But, my dear, you must admit I have a right to know. You might at least have told me. What I can't understand is how on earth you came to be mixed up with these people at all. The last time I heard from you, you were down at Hitherton furnishing the Cottage and arranging to let the Hall. Then the next thing I hear—and from Truby of all people—is that you're wandering round the country with a lot of wretched pierrots. It's too absurd. Just as if you were a little stage-struck girl! How did it happen?"

Miss Trant told her, as best she could, how it happened, giving a very brief sketch of her adventures since she left Hitherton.

"And I suppose it is rather absurd," she admitted, in conclusion. "But one can't always be sensible, can one? After all, you've always done the sort of things you wanted to do, you know, Hilda. And this is something to do, and it's fun, and it isn't doing anybody any harm, in fact it's doing all kinds of people some good, me included."

"I'm not at all sure about that," said Hilda.

"I am," said her sister decisively.

Hilda stared at her and was silent for a moment. She gave the impression that she was deciding to change her course of action, discarding a whole set of remonstrances and appeals. "Well, Elizabeth," she said at last, quietly, "I'm not going to be the tremendous elder sister and all the rest of it. I'm not going to pretend to be an old-fashioned snob. I won't remind you what Father would have thought of this——" She saw her sister smile, and went on hastily: "Yes, I know. He didn't approve of some of the things I used to do. I'll admit we shall have to leave him out because he hardly approved of anything that wasn't absolutely Victoria and Albert. But nobody has ever called me stodgy, have

they? I'm not stuffy about the theatre and theatrical people. I've met them at parties—the successful ones, I mean—and I've invited them myself, and I'll admit I've been glad to see them and meet them. Everybody is, nowadays, except a few old freaks. But this sort of thing is simply shabby and fourth rate. It's nothing but a crowd of beery men and common little girls trailing round from one dirty set of lodgings to another, living in the most awful kind of way on about twopence a week ——"

"Splendid, Hilda!" cried Miss Trant. "I never knew you were such an orator. I don't agree with you, but go on."

"Well, you must admit, my dear, there isn't one of these people you'd dream of asking in even for a cup of tea at Hitherton."

"I don't admit it. And even if I did, it doesn't prove anything. I refuse to regulate everything by what I might do at Hitherton. I've had rather a lot of Hitherton, you know," she added, and in a tone of voice that helped Hilda to remember that she herself had taken care to have very little of Hitherton.

"Oh, I know you had a dull and rather awful time there," cried Hilda, rather plaintively. "And you know that I didn't mind at all about all the money and everything coming to you."

"Of course, my dear. You needn't tell me that."

"Both Lawrence and I were glad, and we were hoping you would come and stay with us for some time and meet people and perhaps settle in town if you wanted to. I'd made all sorts of plans, Elizabeth ——"

"I'm very sorry to have upset your plans, Hilda."

"No, don't be absurd. But you must see that you can't possibly go on with this crazy scheme. If it were something decent, I wouldn't mind—though you must admit you don't know anything about business—but this is too ridiculous. To begin with, it's too dingy and futile for words. Then you don't know anything about this sort of thing."

"Well, I didn't, certainly. But I'm learning. And it's great fun. I like it."

"And, as Lawrence says, these pierrot people are probably robbing you right and left, just living on you and laughing at you behind your back."

"No they're not," replied Miss Trant warmly. "That's certainly not true. They're very grateful—and—and loyal—and awfully hard-working. They're just as honest and decent as any of the people I've known. The only difference is—they're more amusing."

"For a time perhaps, that's all."

"That may be. Perhaps one can only settle down with the kind of people one's always known, and been brought up with, but then I'm not settling down, I'm having a change. You see, I wanted something to do, and now I'm doing it. I'm quite willing to admit that I may get tired of this life pretty soon, but until I do I intend to go on with it, to finish my little adventure. So there you are, Hilda!"

"Oh, but don't you see——!" She was exasperated now. "It's just like talking to one of the children, it really is. Don't you see that anything might happen while you're going on like this? We can't have you wandering round all winter staying in the most dreadful places, by yourself, without a single person near you could trust to be sensible. And not only that, but what's going to happen to your money? You might easily lose every penny. It's monstrous, Elizabeth. Now honestly, have you made any money so far?"

"Not a ha'penny," Miss Trant replied cheerfully.

"There you are!" Hilda was triumphant. "You haven't, and you never will. I expect they're all hopeless, these people, or they wouldn't have been stranded like that."

"No, they're not. Some of them are really clever, far too good for the audiences they're having. They really are, Hilda. Stay and see the" —she hesitated, then brought it out bravely—"the show tonight." She laughed. "I'll give you a free pass, just as if you had exhibited one of our bills in your shop window."

"No, that's not funny, Elizabeth," Hilda snapped. "And I can't stay tonight, and even if I could, I wouldn't. The whole thing's perfectly monstrous. Look at those people in there! You know very well you felt uncomfortable the moment I set eyes on them. *Good Companions* indeed! And all the time you're spending your money to keep these feeble creatures in—in—beer. And they're laughing at you, knowing quite well they don't even need audiences when they've got you to fatten on. And you could be doing so much now, staying with us and meeting

the right kind of people, interesting men, and—oh—everything. I'd like to know how much money you've thrown away already."

"Well, I don't propose to tell you, Hilda."

"If you'd made some money out of it, that would be the tiniest excuse for going on," cried Hilda, who plainly held, however, that it would really be no excuse at all, and was only using the first argument that came to hand. "As it is, there's no excuse."

"That's where you are wrong," said Miss Trant eagerly. "It seems to me all the more reason for my sticking to them. I'm far keener about it now than I was a week ago. We went to a place called Dotworth—a most deadly little town—and lost money there. Yes, it was a complete fiasco, I admit it. And after that, I told myself I wouldn't give up for anything, not until we were really successful. Can't you imagine what I feel about it, Hilda? I really like these pierrots—you'd like some of them too—and I think they like me and hate the thought of my losing money, and I should hate myself for ever if I ran away now and let them down. Besides, I should despise myself just for running away, throwing all the adventure away just to feel safe and comfortable, just because a few people might be shocked."

"You're getting angry and excited now, my dear," cried Hilda, raising her voice. "I knew you would. And I knew you'd be absurd and stubborn about it. You stuck down there at Hitherton, wouldn't move, and now of course the minute you feel yourself free, you must go and do something absolutely senseless. Yes, wickedly senseless!" There were tears of vexation in her eyes. "If you want to do something, have adventures, as you call it, there are plenty of things you could do that would be worth doing and wouldn't make you and the rest of us simply laughing-stocks. It's all so silly and useless. There couldn't be anything sillier. Singing old music-hall songs and joggling at the knees and repeating stale jokes! Going round making shopgirls giggle! Cadging sixpences from butchers' boys! And you of all people, Elizabeth! It's perfectly incredible. And you might be meeting men you could marry, instead of hobnobbing with broken-down actors in awful places like this."

"I don't want to marry. And please stop, Hilda." Miss Trant was not flushed now but pale. For the moment she could not stand up against this vehemence, in which there was real cutting scorn. She was

at a grave disadvantage because she was still open to all the attack and could not produce a defence that she knew existed. It was not merely that Hilda would not understand her motives, but that she did not really understand them herself. They came from obscure but vital needs, from desires that had vanished underground, like the limestone country rivers, in girlhood. She did not know herself why there was something strangely satisfying about this life of dancing and singing and tinsel and limelight and odd journeys. She knew it was good to be full of plans, to be responsible, to be the comrade, perhaps the leader, of these lovable creatures of the stage, but the rest she could not explain. So, for the moment, she was dumb, helpless.

Hilda saw her advantage but halted for a breathing-space before she pressed it home. And she was too late.

"Oh, Miss Trant!" cried a voice.

"Why, Miss Thong!" said Miss Trant delightedly. "I'm so glad."

"Yes, isn't it nice? And what a journey! But here I am, with the dresses all ready. We've brought them too, you see. Elsie carried most, of course. Oh, but I'm interrupting, aren't I? I'm sorry, I'm sure. You know what I am, I get carried away."

"It's all right," said Miss Trant, smiling at her. "This is my sister, Mrs. Newent. And this is Miss Thong, who has been making some absolutely wonderful dresses for us."

"Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure," cried Miss Thong, who was bobbing about in an ecstasy. "Though if I'm fit to meet anybody or even to be seen, I shall be surprised, I shall indeed. What with working at the dresses and putting people off and smoothing Pa down and packing up and the long railway ride and meeting Elsie at the station and seeing the sea—well, well——" She began coughing, wrestled desperately, and gasped out her apologies to Hilda, who could not help staring at the queer rickety little mortal. "There, if that doesn't just serve me right," she concluded cheerfully. "That's me all over. Talk, talk, get excited, won't let others get a word in edgeways, then I land myself! Miss Trant'll tell you how silly I am, Mrs. Newark."

"We must go into the Pavilion and look at the dresses," said Miss Trant. "Unless you're too tired, Miss Thong, and would rather wait."

"I couldn't wait a single minute. I said to Elsie, 'Just take me to

Miss Trant and let her see the dresses or I shan't rest,' I said, 'or it's like being here under false pretences,' I said, didn't I, Elsie? Where is she? She must have taken them in, all but these. Yes, do let's go in. Are you interested in these stage dresses, Mrs. Newark? I'm sure you are, being Miss Trant's sister, and then having such nice taste yourself. You don't mind me saying that, do you? I know it's rather personal, coming from a stranger, but us dressmakers we can't help noticing, you know. I see in a minute. 'She knows what's nice,' I say to myself. 'London style and good,' I said to myself the very moment I saw you, Mrs. Newark. You're sure you don't mind? I don't know what I shan't say before the day's out, and that's the state I'm in. Doesn't the air seem good? Can't you feel it going inside you?"

"I've only just arrived myself," said Hilda. "But the air does seem good here, I must say."

"Doesn't it?" cried Miss Thong, with so much enthusiasm that the two of them might have been arguing for hours and have only just reached a triumphant concordance. "That's exactly what I say. I felt the benefit of it as soon as I set foot outside the station. Elsie laughed at me the way I breathed in and out, but get it while you can, I say. Is this where we go?"

"Come along, Hilda," said Miss Trant. "You must see these dresses." And then, a bolder stroke: "I'd like your advice too."

And Hilda followed them in, only making a few faint noises that perhaps suggested it was no concern of hers. She had been offering her sister advice about clothes for the last fifteen years and she was not going to stop now, even if the girl had suddenly turned herself into a manager of pierrots. Once inside, however, she was compelled to listen to the enthusiastic babble of Miss Thong, who seemed to think it was her duty to attach herself to this other visitor.

"So this is where you are then," cried Miss Thong. "Oh, isn't it nicely fit-up? Proper stage too! And I shall see them all on it tonight and my dresses as well. Where will I be sitting, I wonder. I'd like to sit on my seat now, just to try it. Where will you be sitting, Mrs. Newark?"

"I shan't be here. I'm going back to London."

"Are you really? Isn't that a shame! But I expect you can see them

any time, can't you, being Miss Trant's sister and able to come and go, I dare say. It's a treat for little me, I can tell you. The way I've looked forward to it, and coming on top of the journey as well! They *are* good, aren't they? And better still now than when I saw them! And fancy seeing the dresses you've made yourself coming out on to the stage, part of it all, as you might say, just fancy that!"

Miss Trant was examining a dress that Elsie was holding out. "Oh, but this is perfectly lovely," she cried. She looked up, caught her sister's eye, and saw a gleam of interest in it. "Do look at this, Hilda," she said.

"Yes, it is rather charming," Hilda admitted. "But too good for this sort of work, I should think."

"Oh no, Mrs. Newark," cried Miss Thong. "You can't say that. It'll wear like anything and wash too. Just you take hold of it and have a good look.

And Hilda did have a good look, at that and the others, and though she still maintained a rather stately and condescending attitude, as if she were looking down upon the dresses, their creator, and their prospective wearers, from a great height, she even went to the length of congratulating Miss Thong.

"I had thought of having a sort of Mid-Victorian scene," Miss Trant told her. "Do you remember that pile of old songs we had at home? Some of them could be used. Do you remember how we used to laugh at them, though some were quite charming? And what became of the crinoline? Didn't you take it to town for a fancy dress?"

"Yes, but you couldn't use it for the stage," said Hilda, forgetting herself. "It's not bright enough. Besides, it's far too skimpy. Don't you remember how small it was? I meant to have it altered but I never did."

"Yes, I know, Hilda, but I thought if you wouldn't mind lending it to me—a Mid-Victorian scene would be delightful, wouldn't it—Miss Thong could copy it more or less. You see how clever she is. I quite agree that it's not bright enough. Now what colours would you suggest, my dear?" she enquired demurely.

It was absurd, but Hilda found herself not only promising to lend the crinoline but also suggesting colours and materials and actually discuss-

ing the whole question with this fantastic little dressmaker that Elizabeth had picked up on her ridiculous travels. And by the time they had finished, she was ready for a cup of tea. But she did not stay for the performance in the evening. To have done that would have been to suggest that she had no will of her own at all, to say nothing of missing the Dexters' party. She insisted upon returning, as she had planned, by the 5.35, and said so a good many times, for somehow it sounded like a train that a strong-minded woman would catch.

"And mind you, Elizabeth," she said at the station, "I haven't changed my mind in the least. I think you're behaving dreadfully. The whole thing's too absurd for anything. And you really ought to see Lawrence as soon as you can, because you're probably being hopelessly swindled every minute. And do look after yourself, and the very instant you feel less mulish and realise how futile and wearing the whole thing is, let us know, just drop it, and run, and we'll see—at least Lawrence will—that these people don't try to take advantage."

"Very well, Hilda. I will," said Miss Trant, very quietly, almost submissively, and with only the tiniest flicker of amusement in her face. But she could hear the voice of another Hilda, busy explaining away the antics of her younger sister, Elizabeth, and even making social capital out of them. "Yes, my dear," this voice was saying brightly, "it's perfectly true. The crazy creature is actually running round the country, managing a concert party. Of course they're not the ordinary kind of awful fourth-rate people, but really good—one or two quite young and simply geniuses—and Elizabeth discovered them in some obscure place and said she would make them famous. And there she is, hiring theatres and designing costumes and all the rest of it. Oh, quite crazy, of course! But very amusing and original, don't you think? Exactly! Why not? That's what I say. As a matter of fact, I've given her some pretty good advice about one or two things she didn't understand." And so that other voice ran on, while Miss Trant lifted her eyes demurely to meet her sister's reproachful glance.

After Hilda had given a final caution and a final wave from the 5.35, Miss Trant returned briskly to her little hotel, with a wind from the sea whipping the blood in her cheeks for her flying colours. She did not care now. There were no longer two Miss Trants, wrestling and jabbing

in the dark of her mind, but only one, looking boldly upon the world out of two fine grey eyes. The test had come—and gone. If only these people would crowd in and enjoy her *Good Companions,* instead of staying miserably at home or going to the pictures or sitting in bar-parlours all night, she would be happy.

IV

Wednesday night was better than Monday or Tuesday; there were more people, especially in the cheaper seats, and, perhaps influenced by Miss Thong, who clapped everything, they were a trifle more enthusiastic. Thursday night was better still, but then Thursday was closing-day for the shops. Friday, however, was just as good as Thursday, and rather more appreciative. But none of these—as Mrs. Joe said—were what you could really call Nights. There were still rows and rows of empty chairs (the Wood Family, Jimmy Nunn called them); the applause was feeble, scattered, and there was hardly an excuse for an encore; and it was difficult not to feel that the mournful night was drifting in and smothering such enthusiasm as there was in the half-empty pavilion. And now the great question was, Would Saturday be a Night?

"If Saturday's a fizzle," Mrs. Joe announced on Friday night, in the ladies' dressing-room, "I shan't dare to look Miss Trant in the face, my dears. Dotworth didn't matter——"

"There wasn't tuppence in the whole rotten little town," Elsie put in, rubbing her face far too vigorously. "If they had a whist-drive there, they'd want to knock off and stay at home for six months."

"But this place is different. It's supposed to be a good date, and after all it's only the middle of October. And look what we've done," Mrs. Joe added, dejectedly. "Miss Trant will think we're a lot of Jonahs, that is, if she understands the expression, which I doubt."

"Lucky for her!" cried Susie, that child of the theatre. She pulled her dress over her head, and then remarked on emerging: "I must say I'd like to show her a real Night. She's cheerful enough—bless her!—but I fancy a full house, money turned away, encores all round, five curtains, speeches, thanks from the manager—the usual 'riot' that everybody talks about in the adverts, and hardly anybody ever sees—would buck

her up no end. I know it would. And that new number of mine that Jimmy and Inigo have written is only waiting for an audience that isn't sitting there just to hear *God Save the King*. It's just crying out, ladies, for a few live ones in front."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Joe. "Experienced as I am—and very few artistes who *are* artistes have struck more dead frosts than I have in my time—I cannot, no, I can*not,* sing to chairs. I can feel the empty spaces, my dear, I assure you I can, and you've no idea how it wrecks my interpretation. I told Miss Trant this morning when I met her on the front: I said 'Properly speaking, you've not heard me really interpret a song yet.' But I didn't tell her why. I felt it would have been adding insult to injury —not that I've done her any injury, but you know what I mean?"

They did know what she meant, and they all sighed in chorus for a Night.

Jimmy Nunn and Mr. Morton Mitcham, having what they called "a quick one" with the manager of the Pier, Mr. Porson, in the Refreshment Room on Saturday morning, could not keep away from the subject.

"Yes," said Mr. Porson, "we're round about forty-three pounds so far. That means you'll just about make up to your guarantee tonight, unless of course there's a rush. A wet night might bring 'em in, though they're not fond of walking out to the Pier on a wet night. If it's fine, then they don't want to come inside, and if it's wet they don't fancy the Pier." And Mr. Porson added the short and rather cheerless laugh that he always tacked on to this observation, which he had made already at least fifty times this season, to say nothing of other seasons.

"If you ask me," said Mr. Mitcham impressively, "I think we're getting going in the town. Some of the fellows who come in here, fellows who never go in to see a show, are beginning to talk about it. They've heard something, you see. If we were here another week, we'd be playing to capacity. I know. I've seen it before. But there you are, we're not."

"Just what I think," Jimmy Nunn admitted sadly. "We've got going, but too late. And damned hard cheese, I call it. As I told you, Mr. Porson, this lady who's the boss, Miss Trant, she's put up a lot of money for us——"

"A lot of money," Mr. Mitcham repeated emphatically, with the air of a man who knows money when he sees it.

"She's new to it, you see, Mr. Porson," Jimmy continued, "and she's one of the best, a real lady too—general's daughter, they say. It's time she began seeing something for her money."

"She'll think we've sold her the gold brick," Mr. Mitcham put in mournfully.

"And the show ought to go," said Jimmy.

"It oughter go big," said Mr. Mitcham, who, in this despondent mood, seemed to become more Transatlantic.

Mr. Porson had heard something like this, usually in this very bar, every week since April, but he immediately agreed that it was a good show. "I don't say it's everybody's show," he said judicially. "It's not one of your bustling, knock-'em-about, come-on-let's-have-the-applause shows. But I'll tell you frankly—I like it. You can put me down for that. It's a fine little show, and we're as disappointed as you are." He finished his drink. "Well, I must be trotting." Mr. Porson was always trotting, as Miss Trant and Jimmy and other people who had business with him knew to their cost. He trotted so much that he could never be found. The other two watched him go, and then looked at one another with slightly raised brows, which announced that they had no great opinion of Mr. Porson, that Mr. Porson might be pleasant enough over a drink but nevertheless was a thoroughly incompetent person, the kind of manager who would ruin the chances of any show.

"What about finishing these and then walking down to see if there are any bookings?" Jimmy asked. The box office was at the entrance to the Pier. It took them ten minutes to reach it, but by the time they did they had quietly dismissed nine men out of every ten who had found their way, obviously by influence, my boy, into management, as creatures who merely cumbered the ground.

"Good morning, my dear; you're looking very bright this morning," said Mr. Mitcham to the young lady in the box office, who looked anything but bright. "And how are things?"

But the young lady, who suffered a good deal from bronchial trouble, really did brighten now. "Quite picking up today," she replied. "I've booked out about two and a half rows of the two-and-fourpennies already, and I've had several enquiries on the telephone. I shouldn't be

surprised if a lot of the better-class people aren't coming, for once. I believe you're going to get a good house tonight."

"Bless you, my child, for those kind words," said Jimmy. Then he exchanged a glance with Mr. Mitcham. "It looks better, ol' man."

"It's just as I said," replied Mr. Mitcham. "We've got going in the town, though only at the last minute. Another week and it 'ud be capacity every night."

"Well, a good send-off will be something. It'll cheer us all up and look well in the adverts. 'Thanks for wonderful send-off at Sandybay. Last night a riot!' And I'll tell you what I think, Mitcham," Jimmy added earnestly. "Mr. Porson ought to get more chairs in. He told me himself he'd lent about fifty to the corporation. Let him put 'em back, I say. There's time this afternoon. I'll leave a message."

Miss Trant herself saw the extra chairs being taken in, late in the afternoon. Mr. Oakroyd was there, lending a hand.

"I suppose they're expecting something rather wonderful next week," she said to him, with a touch of bitterness. "They don't want any more seats for us."

"Nay, Miss Trant, they do," he told her, pushing back his little brown cap as usual, for he always wore his cap and always saluted her in this manner. "It's going to be a right big do, they tell me, and even wi' these extras ther'll nobbut be standing room for them as comes at last minute, I dare say. All t'fowk where I'm lodging and ther friends and realations is coming, I do knaw, and all t'better seats is booked up, two and fower a time."

"Oh, but that's splendid, isn't it, Mr. Oakroyd?" she cried.

"It'll be a bit of a change," he admitted drily.

She looked at him reproachfully. "Is that all you can say?"

Mr. Oakroyd did not blush because he was not in the habit of blushing, but he looked a trifle confused. "Nay," he protested, "I'm right glad. It's champion."

Miss Trant, rather excited now, returned to the Pavilion earlier than usual in the evening, and though there was the usual mournful drizzle, making the Pier look as forlorn as ever, already people were streaming along towards the Pavilion. Sandybay had discovered, at the eleventh hour, that *The Good Companions* were offering it an unusually good

show. Ten minutes before the performance began, all the unreserved seats were filled and there were numbers of people standing at each side and at the back. In another five minutes, after a few more had been squeezed in, the "House Full" notice was put up and they were actually turning money away. Miss Trant, who was sitting in a corner in the wings, near the ladies' dressing-room, had the news from Mr. Porson himself, and immediately both dressing-rooms and wings buzzed with it: "Turning money away, my dear"; "Capacity to the roof, ol' man"; and they took turns at peeping through the curtain. "Going to be a Night, my dear," they cried to one another. "What did I say? Something told me."

"Now, Miss Trant," said Mrs. Joe, "can't you feel a difference?"

Miss Trant could. The whole atmosphere of the place was changed. You knew at once that on the other side of the curtain there were no longer any cold spaces and empty chairs and yawns and languid stares; that everybody there was expecting to be delightfully entertained, had already met the players more than halfway, was only waiting to hum and laugh and break into gigantic hailstorms of applause. Miss Trant tried hard to be coolly amused at the excitement of the others, but she did not succeed. She was as excited as they were, and was only thankful that she herself had nothing to do. Oh, this might be absurd, but it was thrilling, it was fun!

Jimmy had a last-minute inspiration. "Let's open with the band behind the curtain. Our two numbers. *Slippin' round the Corner,* then Susie's number." Inigo had been able to score these two songs of his for the little jazz band, with some assistance from Morton Mitcham, and they had both been well rehearsed. They got their instruments and took up their places: Inigo at the piano; Jimmy at the drums; Mitcham with his banjo; and Joe, Susie and Elsie respectively with cornet, violin, and tenor saxophone, instruments they all played in a slapdash but sufficiently adequate manner. In less than a minute they were waiting for the signal to begin.

House lights out and footlights up. Applause already. Then—one, two, three, and off they went. *Rumty-dee-tidee-dee. Rumty-dee-tidee.* Quietly at first, then louder, louder, then letting it rip. You could feel the whole house moving to its rhythm through the

curtain. They were tapping; they were humming; they were eating and drinking it. A final flourish, crowned by Jimmy, who crashed his drumstick against the hanging cymbal. A moment's silence. Then the Pavilion seemed all clapping hands.

"Instruments away," shouted Jimmy through the tumult. "All on, and the opening chorus as usual! Come on, come on. Now then, Inigo! Ready with that curtain, Oakroyd! Gosh! it's going with a bang tonight!"

And with a bang it went. They clapped when Joe warned them against the mighty deep, and clapped again when Mrs. Joe discovered Angus Macdonald coming home from the war. They rose as one man when Elsie tunefully announced she was looking for a boy like them. They reduced Morton Mitcham to mere sweat and grinning bone, and he did so many tricks and played so many tunes that both cards and strings must have been red-hot by the time he had done with them. They roared with laughter every time Jimmy opened his mouth or crossed the stage. And when Jerry Jerningham did his slipping round the corner and Susie brought out her new song about going home, then they had no mercy but clapped and stamped and whistled and drummed their feet time after time to bring the two back again. When the final curtain came, it was nearly eleven, three-quarters of an hour past the usual time, and even then the enraptured audience would not stop applauding. "Spee-ee-eech!" some of them were calling.

Jimmy beckoned to Miss Trant, who was standing in the wings, at once excited and exhausted, dithering, because instead of being a mere spectator she had seen both actors and audience. "Come on and say something," Jimmy's mouth shaped at her.

Instantly she waved a frantic negative. She could no more have tottered into that lighted space and spoken to the loud if friendly monster there than have flown to the moon.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jimmy began.

But that was the signal for another outburst, and in the middle of it the attendant could be seen pushing his way up to the stage, carrying a magnificent bouquet of roses. The lights were up now and everybody on the stage could see that approaching bouquet. The three women never took their eyes away from it. Mrs. Joe was not without

her hopes, for might there not be a Music Lover in the house? It flashed through Elsie's mind that probably some gentleman friend—Elsie was rich in gentlemen friends—was in front. Susie was already preparing a special smile and curtsy, for it was hardly possible that the bouquet could be for any one else. If ever a girl had earned a bouquet, she had tonight. The attendant held it up, and Jimmy came forward with a skip and a jump to receive it. He read the label, and the three women held their breath. He turned and, with a droll gesture and smirk, handed it—to Jerry Jerningham.

Mr. Jerningham, very warm, very tired, a little shiny perhaps, but still exquisite, bowed his acknowledgment very gracefully, then, after a quick glance at the label, which said *To Mr. Jerry Jerningham from an Unknown Admirer* and said it in a flowing and feminine handwriting, smiled again at the audience and smiled at his fellow players, three of whom were attempting to disguise looks of mingled amazement and disgust. And it may be admitted, here and now, that there was talk of that monstrous bouquet for weeks afterwards in the ladies' dressing-room, that we ourselves have perhaps not heard the last of it, that the Unknown Admirer may turn up again.

It was over at last. Inigo, hotter and even more weary than Mr. Jerningham and not at all exquisite, hammered out something that approximated to *God Save the King,* and then, safe behind the lowered curtain, nearly fell off his chair. "This is the boy that ought to have a bouquet," said Mrs. Joe, who had a great opinion of Inigo. "Look how he's worked. And never even got so much as a hand!"

"Yes, it's a rotten shame," said Susie, smiling at him. "Look—his lock of hair's nearly coming out. Never mind, you were wonderful, Inigo, and the song's a darling, darling, da-ar-ling." And off she ran.

Miss Trant found Mr. Porson at her elbow, saying something about returns and a future date, but at the moment it was impossible for her to be quietly sensible. They were all still shouting congratulations to one another and clearing away their props. It was like the end of a crazy party. After a minute or two, she decided to wait outside until some of the others had finished changing. And very strange it was to go outside and find the night there, the glitter of the promenade, the

mysterious and murmuring dark of the sea, the lonely lights far out, the chill salt breath that now seemed so sweet.

Out they came, dim shapes with jubilant voices. A cigarette went curving over the side like a tiny meteor, and a voice said: "Ah, I'd rather taste the air than that." They gathered round her. "Well, this was a Night, wasn't it?" they chorussed; and "What a send-off!" and "A riot at Sandybay, my dear!" Jerry Jerningham held out his roses to Elsie, who condescended to smell them. Mrs. Joe found Mr. Joe, who tucked her arm in his and gave the scene a pleasantly domestic flavour, so that you could almost see little George himself there with them. Inigo went dodging round so that he could place himself by the side of Susie, a bafflingly elusive girl. Mr. Mitcham was still in the middle of an anecdote to which nobody was paying any attention. Jimmy Nunn came up, giving instructions to Mr. Oakroyd. Then suddenly, all at once, they were telling one another how tired they were.

"And so am I," cried Miss Trant, "although I haven't done anything. I feel as if I could go to bed for three days. Thank goodness it's Sunday tomorrow!"

"Yes," said Jimmy, "and by the way, I've looked up the trains for Winstead. I've got it down in my notebook and I'll look it up when we get to the entrance. No Through, of course. The usual cross-country business—an hour's wait at Mudby-on-the-Wash and then another hour at Washby-on-the-Mud, and so on. Who are you taking in the car, Miss Trant? You'd better let us know now."

"Oh, good heavens, I'd forgotten!" she cried, in such droll dismay that they laughed. "I was thinking I was going to have a nice quiet day here, breakfast in bed with a book and then a little sewing. I'd forgotten all about Winstead. Isn't it terrible? We've got to begin all over again." And then they laughed at her again, for there was something in her tone that told them she was now much happier about it all and seemed to establish her companionship with them. They moved slowly towards the Pier entrance, planning the next day's journey.